



The Meaning and Value of Organizational Culture

What is organizational culture and why does it matter?

Culture is dynamic. Dense. Complicated. It is a fabric woven from countless implicit and explicit events, issues, and symbols. Trying to define or comprise culture often seems an exercise akin to quantum physics. Yet culture is observable and strong at its core. And it is present in every organization regardless of whether it is acknowledged or fully understood.

Culture is vital to the well being and success of an organization: It reduces uncertainty by creating a common methodology and language for interpreting events and issues; it provides a sense of order so that all team members know what is expected; it creates a sense of continuity; it provides a common identity and unity of commitment, a sense of belonging; it offers a vision of the future around which a company can rally. It is, in short, an asset that can and should be managed in support of organization goals.

Understanding Organizational Culture

Discovering what needs to be managed begins with a clear perception about what comprises organizational culture. The discipline has evolved considerably over the past two generations and there are nearly as many definitions of it as there are texts to explain its purpose. There is a reasonable, basic definition, however, that acknowledges organizational culture as: a company's prevailing values, attitudes, beliefs, artifacts, and behaviors that contribute to its sense of order, continuity, and commitment. It is also important to recognize that there are essential components to every definition of organizational culture: (1) the concept of shared meaning; (2) the notion that organizational structure is constructed socially and is affected by environment; (3) that organizational culture has many symbolic and cognitive layers and resides at all levels within a company.

Who Are You, What Are You?

Gaining a true understanding of your organization's culture requires some upfront effort. There is a widely accepted framework for this task — the Organizational Culture Assessment Instrument developed by Kim S. Cameron and Robert E. Quinn. Tested in numerous applications, this instrument assesses six critical aspects of culture and is taken by everyone in an organization.

Cameron and Quinn identify four basic types of organizational culture that assessments fall within: Hierarchy, Market, Clan, and Adhocracy. Hierarchical organizations tend to value standardization, control and a well-defined, inward-driven authority structure. A Market-oriented organization is similar to a Hierarchy in its value of stability and control, but relies on an external focus and values differentiation over integration, relationships and transactions over directives. Clans build off Hierarchies as well, with an inward focus and concern for integration. But Clans derive their true power from a team-centered approach. Not unlike families, Clans value cohesion, group commitment and loyalty. An Adhocracy shares with Clans the values of flexibility and discretion, but are driven by an outward focus.

Each of these base organizational cultural types carries with it different attitudes and behaviors, different work patterns that must be recognized to effectively optimize effort. It should also be acknowledged that more than one type of behavior may be present. Work groups within larger organizations may operate as subcultures. While they still work within the orbit of the parent, they will likely have discrete workspace needs.

Organizational Culture and Space Planning

Who needs what? And when?

Working from the four previously defined organizational culture types we can begin to get a clearer picture of what we are, and what we need to bring out the best of what we are. Hierarchies thrive on structure, stability, continuity of look, from space to space. Market cultures are hard-driving, results-oriented organizations that need to operate openly and be able to quickly adapt to change. Clans demand openness, accessibility, a sense of belonging and comfort within the larger corporate environment. Adhocracies are perhaps the most free-flowing of cultures, thriving through innovation, risk-taking, and individual initiative that demand as little structure as necessary.

Matching culture with space needs is art as well as science. It is rare that a single space solution benefits an entire organization. As mentioned, subcultures must be understood and acknowledged. Designing with concern for corporate culture requires forging alliances with symbolic and aesthetic needs as well as functional. It becomes a matter of synthesis, of building on the framework of a meaningful cultural assessment to resolve complex, and often competing, issues with creative, meaningful solutions.

The ability to successfully plan and implement a workspace is, in itself, an exercise in the value and validity of corporate culture and the foundation to a future in which all members of an organization are working in harmony to improve business performance.

Links

Defining "Culture" and "Organizational Culture:" From Anthropology to Office. Bruce M. Tharp.

Diagnosing Organizational Culture. Bruce M. Tharp.

Four Organizational Culture Types. Bruce M. Tharp.