Understanding and Influencing Culture Executive Briefing

Culture is a complex social reality that is difficult to change, hard to define, multi-layered, and a major influence of behavior and performance. Leaders must attend to their unit cultures, especially guarding against movement towards toxicity. Cultural intelligence is critical for the leader of an academic unit.

Here are some basic tips and hints for thinking about working culture—and influencing it in positive ways.

What is Culture?

Within a social unit, its culture is its collective values and beliefs, and can be described in a number of ways. Geert Hofstede, a well known culture researcher, calls it, "the collective programming of the mind." Culture exists anywhere people form social units. Your family has a culture. Your weekly social event group has a culture. Your academic unit has a culture— perhaps more than one. Your college, university, city, state, and country have cultures. Culture is ubiquitous, yet often difficult to define. Like an iceberg, culture is mostly hidden.

Why do you care?

Because culture is pervasive, difficult to change, and influences the behavior of those within the unit. Cultures can be strong or weak, good or bad. There is no perfect culture. As a leader, you are responsible for the culture of your unit.

Culture Persistence

Cultures are formed and maintained through several related processes: the tendency of people to select those like them (and for those like them to be attracted to such groups); the way employees are welcomed and oriented ("onboarded") in work groups, and the conduct that is rewarded—or not—in a unit's culture.

Similarity-Attraction

Cultures begin with the people you recruit. People are attracted to social groups in which they believe they fit. Groups likewise select people they think fit. If a "mistake" is made, the non-fitting person tends to leave the group, voluntarily or otherwise. In the scholarly literature this is known as the ASA model, for Attraction-Selection-Attrition.

Interviewers and decision makers during the hiring process influence your culture through the people they attract to the unit. Contributors to a negative culture can attract other negative influences to the unit. Bob Sutton speaks to this: if you hire a jerk, you increase your chances of getting other jerks. As a result, dysfunctional cultures tend to remain dysfunctional without intervention.

▶ Hire carefully.

New Employee Orientation

Expectations are more easily set in the beginning than later in the employment relationship. Frank Herbert wrote "A beginning is the time for taking the most delicate care that the balances are correct." Research into first impressions supports this idea.

In the beginning, new hires are are looking for cues about "how things are around here" and thus are sensitive to a vast array of social stimuli as they are attempting to understand their place and role in the unit. They test the concepts of the unit they developed during the hiring process.

It is thus easier to acclimate a new unit member to expected conduct and norms culture than to "fix" his or her approaches. Consciously orienting and exposing new employees early to the positive, desired aspects of what you seek can avoid many problems later.

▶ Work to assure that the messages and people involved in orientation are sensitive to and focused on getting things started in a positive way.

Reward Systems

Edmund Burke wrote "All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing." Stephen Kerr, an organizational researcher, wrote a famous piece "*On the folly of hoping for A while rewarding B.*"

Rewards are often disjointed from expressed goals. Many business that say they value long-term profits but focus only on rewarding quarterly goals. Many teams claim to value teamwork but almost exclusively reward individual performance. Academic units that reward solely on scholarly productivity and ignore citizenship can create problems in teaching, service, and citizenship cultures.

Thus consider carefully what conduct is rewarded, both tangibly and intangibly through recognition and comment in your unit, as it emphasizes what is important. What is important becomes part of the "way things are around here," that is, the culture. Even the lack of negative comment can be taken as tacit approval and encourage negative behaviors within a social or work unit. Expressed disapproval or reprimands are cues "things are not this way around here."

▶ Rewards and punishments reinforce "the way things are around here."

Leadership

Leaders are culture managers, and good cultures, like gardens, require maintenance over time. Leaders influence new member selection, new member welcome and orientation, and reward systems. Leaders of academic units can influence culture by encouraging positive people to be on hiring committees and involved in orientation of new members. Leaders reinforce culture through the reward systems. Most of all, leaders influence culture through their own behavior, how they handle or avoid difficult conversations, and their interactions with unit members. An academic unit leader has an enormous impact on the culture of that unit.

> " *LEADERS INFLUENCE CULTURE THROUGH THEIR BEHAVIORS.*

Unit Subcultures

One challenging aspect of culture is that there is often more than one culture in any given unit. Social identity theory, one of the most important organizational theories, suggests that people use differences between themselves and others to formulate in ("good") versus out ("bad") groups. Any source of difference can be a source of discrimination or conflict.

Sub-cultures, then, can create conflict. Academic units with sub-disciplines or different methodologies (empirical vs. theoretical, field work vs. cultural studies, etc.) can form subcultures along those lines. Those who go to the gym at noon can form their own sub-culture, as can those who share a strong interest in an area, or those who run into each other at similar times regularly. Sub-cultures can form notions that their work is better than others, more impactful, more important to society. Differences in teaching load, tenure status, research method, software choice, journal preferences, or any other salient difference that can create fault lines between unit members can be a catalyst for the formation of subcultures.

Leaders must take special care first to recognize and then to reconcile differences between subcultures, emphasize strengths obtained by encompassing sub-cultures, and emphasize the value of overall unit membership.

In a unit with strong subcultures, the strong leader is aware of
▶ them and regularly addresses how the differences increase the strength of the unit.

Changing Unit Culture

Changing a culture is not easy. It requires addressing and changing the deeply-held values and beliefs about the very identity of the unit.

People are resistant to culture change because it is natural for people to fear the unknown. Other times unit members are pessimistic about change because they have witnessed other failed change efforts before.

Positive and deliberate culture change begins with a choice to do it, acknowledging that it may be a slow and painful process for many involved.

Creating a sense of urgency about change and "selling" a vision of how much better the unit will be afterwards is critical for unit members to "unfreeze" their view of the culture and buy into a change process.

It can be difficult to achieve significant culture change in a static unit: it is often necessary to re-organize how key members of the unit are placed and interact, or to change leadership.

Role modeling the new culture and training unit members to adopt the new behaviors is important. Visible representations of the culture serve to reinforce the culture.

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National Cultures

Academic units often comprise members from a variety of national cultures. It can be helpful to understand the differences between these cultures, and the expectations unit members may carry from their acculturation to other ways of doing things in their home country or where their disciplinary education took place.

Some key elements of cultural understanding arising from national culture include

Individualism vs Collectivism

Cultures differ in how they value collective harmony versus self expression. Collective cultures tend to set aside personal interest in favor of collective well-being more easily than their individualist counterparts.

Equality vs Hierarchy

Culture research suggests this is one of the two most important aspects of national culture. This is often called "power distance." Cultures differ in their comfort with and expectation for authority. While some expect differences between power in hierarchical structures and show deference to the people in higher organizational or social positions, others do not have this expectation and feel uncomfortable with it. This can be evident in forms of address (e.g., using title and last name versus first name), expectation for access (open door vs. specific appointments), and willingness to initiate contact: high power distance individuals often will not intimate contact with people higher in status.

Universalism vs Particularism.

Universalists seek universal norms and rules to guide behavior. Particularists, on the other hand, admit exceptions to these rules, often based on personal relationship. For these individuals, rules exist more for "other people" than "us."

Particularists are more likely to expect their friends and colleagues will be treated better than the norm. Particularists will struggle to accept university policy adherence more than universalists.

Direct vs Indirect Communication

This is also known as high vs. low context communication. Direct communicators say what they mean, use more definitive language, and rely on body language less than indirect communicators. This later group tends to obfuscate meaning, and hint at things obliquely. For example. indirect communicators are more likely to say a project "may" be late when they know for sure that it will be. Mixing these types of communicators in a group is challenging because direct communicators seem rude and insensitive to indirect communicators. Meanwhile, direct communicators become angry at the meandering nature of conversations and inability to get a straight answer.

Affective vs Neutral Feelings

This cultural aspect deals with expressiveness in communication. Affective cultures are very expressive, opt for transparency in communications, use touch and gestures, and often speak quickly and heatedly. Conversely, neutral cultures are guarded with respect to their thoughts and emotions, hold in emotions often to the point of explosion. These cultures admire and promote the idea that the "right" way to conduct themselves is through a cool, calm, and collected communication style. Neutral individuals can seem boring and unengaged to affectives. Affectives can seem loud, rude, and off-putting to neutrals.

Public vs Private Space

Proxemics is the study of how people use space in communication. Some people prefer a larger "personal space" around them, whereas others prefer a smaller space. Watch for cues like people moving closer to or further from you during conversations. This may be a cue that you are violating their sense of personal space. Getting too close can be uncomfortable. Being too far communicates distance and disinterest. Be mindful not to impose your sense of space on others.

Conclusion

Culture is a complex social reality that is difficult to change, hard to define, multi-layered, and a major influence of behavior and performance. Leaders must attend to their unit cultures, especially guarding against movement towards toxicity. Cultural intelligence is critical for the leader of an academic unit.