The Culture eBook: How to identify, evaluate, and improve your workplace culture

What is culture?

When you belong to an organization, there's usually a reason. Whether it's a business, club, or other group, something about it appealed to you, and you chose to associate yourself with it. Alternatively, you may have considered joining an organization, but decided against it because it didn't feel like a good fit.

This sense of belonging—or not belonging—is often due to the organization's culture. Every group has one and it's typically made up of three components: rules, traditions, and personalities.

RULES

The rules of an organization are the beliefs, norms, values, and attitudes that have been codified by the organization's leadership into expectations, policies, and procedures. They tell people what they're supposed to do and how they're supposed to act and interact. You typically find these rules in official documents like the employee handbook, operations manual, and statement of corporate values. Sometimes, though, rules may be "unwritten," for example, an expectation that employees load their dishes in the dishwasher or not use emojis in communications with customers.

The kind of culture you have as an employer will depend in large part on the kinds of rules you have. If you want a culture that adheres to specific values, such as honesty and respect, you need rules that tell people that these values are important and that motivate employees to exhibit them in their work.

TRADITIONS

While rules tell employees what they should do and how they should act, traditions give employees the means to work together and build relationships with one another. The traditions of a workplace are its ongoing and recurring practices. They are its conventions, customs, rituals, ceremonies, activities, and physical workspace arrangements.

The traditions of a workplace might include grand events like award ceremonies or annual retreats, but they also include mundane things like everyday meetings and standardized communication methods. When a company has meetings, for example, it brings people together and gives structure to their discussions. When a company has a peer recognition program, it provides an opportunity for employees to offer praise and gratitude. It's through workplace traditions that people ultimately build and maintain professional relationships.

PERSONALITIES

If you suddenly replaced everyone in a company, the company might be the same legal entity, but it wouldn't be the same place or have the same culture, even if the rules, traditions, operations, and strategy remained the same. People matter. A lot of what accounts for the character of a workplace is simply who the people are as individuals and the free choices they make.

A culture may be rooted in core principles, but it also moves and changes. Your employees will change the culture simply by being themselves. Encourage them to improve it!

DEVELOPING YOUR CULTURE

Because your culture depends, in part, on the people who work for you, you will never have complete control over it. Nevertheless, culture isn't something you should ignore. If your company has rules, traditions, and people working together, it has a culture, and that culture affects your operations and strategy—as well as how employees and customers perceive your company.

Identifying your culture

IDENTIFY YOUR RULES AND TRADITIONS

To identify your culture, examine your rules and traditions, and note what kinds of behaviors and employee interactions they result in. You may not have a mission statement or a set of core values on your wall, but people in your company do act and interact in discernible ways. What are those ways? Think about the beliefs, norms, attitudes, goals, conventions, and behaviors you see at work. What are the common themes and behavioral trends? If employees don't seem to work and interact in cohesive or structured ways, in what ways do they function?

As you go through your rules and traditions, try to come up with about five words that describe the way people behave, treat each other, and work together. These are the characteristics of your culture. But, be sure to be honest. Describe the characteristics that you see, not the characteristics that you'd like to see.

IDENTIFY CONFLICTS BETWEEN PHILOSOPHY AND PRACTICE

After you've observed and evaluated your rules and traditions, check for any conflict or resistance to these rules and traditions. If you have defined core values, do people follow them? If you have established policies, do you enforce them? Do you consistently hold people accountable to your expectations? If you have a peer recognition program, do employees use it to praise their co-workers?

Just because you've established rules and traditions, doesn't mean that they've had a strong effect on the workplace. Maybe employees aren't motivated to follow the policies and procedures you set up. Or maybe there are other factors at play. Maybe individual managers have their own ways of doing things that end up overruling company policies. If people are working in conflicting ways, try to find out why. Knowing the reasons will be important when you start to assess and improve your company culture.

IDENTIFY YOUR PEOPLE

The last thing to consider when identifying your culture is the people who work in your organization. A big influence on culture is simply the people in a place and how they work and get along as individuals.

Who are your formal and informal leaders? How are they influencing people in your workplace, and in what ways? What kinds of personalities and personal values do your employees have? Do people tend to work harmoniously or do they clash?

NEED HELP IDENTIFYING YOUR CULTURE? ASK YOUR EMPLOYEES!

Identifying your culture is a long process, and it may require more in-depth insight than one person can manage. One way to get a more expansive view is to survey your employees to get their thoughts.

Another option is to set up a Culture Committee that is composed of employees from various departments. Since the members will come from across the company, they will see things you might miss. With their help, you'll get a more accurate and complete picture of the culture and a better sense of when the culture is changing.

Evaluating your culture

Once you know what your culture is, you can then start to evaluate it. Is it a good culture or a bad culture? Does it support your ongoing success, or does it stop you from reaching your goals?

The specifics of a good culture vary from company to company, but there are a few general qualities of a good culture that you should aim for whatever your industry and mission. A good culture should be:

01 Well-defined and understood

02 Embraced by people in the company

03 In alignment with your mission

04 Beneficial to the long-term success of the company

IS YOUR CULTURE DEFINED AND UNDERSTOOD?

If you asked your employees to talk about your company culture, would they know what to say? Would they have similar answers? Could they point to a mission or vision statement? Maybe a set of core values and shared beliefs? What about company policies and procedures? In short, do they know how people are expected to behave and interact in the workplace? Do they know the rules? The traditions?

You won't have much control over your culture if you don't clearly define it. You don't need to write down every expectation, but they should be evident in some way. That said, written statements really do help. As does adding them to your company handbook. They make it easier to communicate those expectations and hold everyone accountable to them.

IS YOUR CULTURE EMBRACED?

If you've defined your culture and clearly communicated it to employees, the next question to ask is whether your employees embrace it. It's important that the people who work for you believe in the purpose of the company and ways you set out to achieve it.

Remember, though, that culture isn't set in stone. It's always developing and adjusting since culture lives and grows out of the way people in an organization think, feel, and act. Each new person will bring something different: new habits, new perspectives, new ideas. So, encourage employees to make the culture their own and encourage their ideas for its improvement.

IS YOUR CULTURE ALIGNED WITH THE MISSION OF YOUR ORGANIZATION?

When identifying and assessing your rules and traditions, make sure they all work together and don't undercut each other. Suppose as a company you encourage employees to be innovative, but you also don't put up with mistakes. What would happen? You'd likely stifle innovation. Employees would avoid sharing new ideas, since they'd be worried they might make a mistake.

Also take a good look at the cultures of each department and each team. These smaller groups will have their own ways of interacting and doing things, and that's okay, but their micro-cultures shouldn't fundamentally conflict with the larger organizational culture.

If your overall culture isn't aligned with your mission, or if the cultures of some departments don't match the cultures of others, this can create conflict and disorder.

IS YOUR CULTURE CONDUCIVE TO LONG-TERM SUCCESS?

Among the most important questions to ask when evaluating your culture is whether it's conducive to the organization's success. Your core values and practices might all be in alignment, but what if the values themselves, or the mission or vision, aren't good for long-term sustainability? There's a possibility that the core values you defined aren't really the best ones for you to have. Maybe your current mission and vision won't take you as far as others could.

One way to answer whether your culture will lead to success is to analyze your recent successes and failures, asking why each happened. For this analysis, you would examine the underlying reasons for why people acted the way they did. If, for example, a project failed because there was a breakdown of communication, you'd assess whether the existing policies and procedures for communication played any kind of role. Maybe the rules for how people communicate weren't clear to everyone. Or perhaps people weren't sharing information because they didn't trust one another, in which case you'd want to discover why they didn't trust one another. If your rules or traditions are causing problems, they may need to be revised or abandoned. On the other hand, if they're contributing to your successes, look for ways to strengthen them.

Conclusion

As you work to improve your culture, remember that culture consists of your organization's rules, traditions, and people. Your rules tell your employees how they should do their jobs and how they should work together. Your traditions give them the means to connect and build relationships based on trust and shared values. And your people are unique individuals who bring their own perspectives and ideas to the culture. Identifying, evaluating, and improving your culture can be daunting tasks, but thinking of culture in terms of rules, traditions, and people provides you with a roadmap to success.