

18

CULTURE ASSESSMENT AS PART OF MANAGED ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

Chapters Sixteen and Seventeen described the various ways in which cultures evolve and change. Many of those changes are stimulated by leadership behavior such as promoting people with certain kinds of values and beliefs. When those kinds of activities are too slow, as when an organization is facing the need for rapid change, executive leaders turn to a managed change process, using the change model described in the previous chapter and the processes that are elaborated in my book, *Corporate Culture Survival Guide*, 2d Ed. (2009b). As was pointed out, culture will become implicated in such changes and sometimes becomes the direct target of change. It becomes necessary, then, to have a way of *assessing culture rapidly* so that the change leaders can determine how cultural elements will help them, will hinder them, or will become change targets in their own right.

Rapid Deciphering—A Multistep Group Process

The process that I will describe is designed to give the leaders of a change process a *rapid* way of deciphering elements of their own culture so that they can assess its relevance to their change program. I have often been asked to design a survey or do an interview program in this context and have always argued that this is neither necessary nor desirable. The group interview process described next is both faster and more valid because an interactive process gets to shared assumptions more quickly. This process is most useful in the context of a change program in which the *change goals have already been made explicit* so that the culture can be assessed as a potential aid or hindrance to the change program (Schein, 2009b). Without the change focus, this process can seem boring and pointless.

If I am asked to do a culture assessment, I always ask, “Why do you want to do this?” “What problem are you trying to solve?” “What do you mean by *culture*, and why do you think a culture assessment would be useful.” The answers typically reveal some change agenda that the client has, and it is important to get the client to specify clearly what that change agenda is. After the client has identified in concrete terms what the desired “new way of working” is, the culture assessment can then be done rapidly (Schein, 2009b).

The essence of the assessment process is to bring together one or more representative groups in the organization, provide them a model of how to think about organizational culture and subcultures, and then ask them to identify the main artifacts, the espoused values, and the shared tacit assumptions, with an outsider playing the role of facilitator, documenter, and, when necessary, gadfly and question asker. A member of the organization in a leader role can be the facilitator, as long as it is not his or her own department and as long as he or she has an understanding of how culture works. This kind of assessment is based on several key assumptions:

- Culture is a set of *shared* assumptions; hence, obtaining the initial data in a *group* setting is more appropriate and valid than conducting individual interviews.
- The contextual meaning of cultural assumptions can only be fully understood by members of the culture; hence, creating a vehicle for *their understanding* is more important than for the researcher or consultant to obtain that understanding.
- Not all parts of a culture are relevant to any given issue the organization may be facing; hence, attempting to study an entire culture in all of its facets is not only impractical but also usually inappropriate.
- Insiders are capable of understanding and making explicit the shared tacit assumptions that make up the culture, but they need outsider help in this process. The helper/consultant should therefore operate primarily from a process-consulting model and should avoid, as much as possible, becoming an expert on the content of any given group’s culture (Schein, 1999a, 2009a).
- Some cultural assumptions will be perceived as *helping* the organization to achieve its change goals or resolving its current issues, while

others will be perceived as *constraints or barriers*; hence it is important for the group members to have a process that allows them to sort cultural assumptions into both of these categories.

- Changes in organizational practices to solve the problems that initiated the culture assessment can usually be achieved by building on existing assumptions; that is, the culture-deciphering process often reveals that new practices not only can be derived from the existing culture, but *should* be.
- If *changes in the culture* are discovered to be necessary, those changes will rarely involve the entire culture; it will almost always be a matter of changing one or two assumptions. Only rarely does the basic paradigm have to change, but if it does, the organization faces a multiyear major change process.

Step One: Obtaining Leadership Commitment

Deciphering cultural assumptions and evaluating their relevance to some organizational change program must be viewed as a major intervention in the organization's life and, therefore, must only be undertaken with the full understanding and consent of the formal leaders of the organization. This means not only probing why the leaders in an organization want to do this assessment but also fully describing the process and its potential consequences to obtain their full commitment to the group meetings that will be involved.

Step Two: Selecting Groups for Self-Assessment

The next step is for the facilitator to work with the formal leaders to determine how best to select some groups representative of the corporate culture. The criteria for selection usually depend on the concrete nature of the problem to be solved. Groups can either be homogeneous with respect to a given department or rank level or made deliberately heterogeneous by selecting diagonal slices from the organization. The group can be as small as three and as large as thirty. If important subcultures are believed to be operating, the process can be repeated with several different groups or samples of members can be brought in from different groups in order to test, in the meetings, whether the assumed differences exist.

The composition of the group is further determined by the client leaders' perceptions of the level of trust and openness in the organization, especially in regard to deciding whether senior people who might inhibit the discussion should be present. On the one hand, it is desirable to have a fairly open discussion, which might mean not mixing rank levels. On the other hand, it is critical to determine the extent to which the assumptions that eventually come out in the group meetings are shared across hierarchical levels, which argues for mixed rank groups. Because the level of trust and openness across various boundaries is itself a cultural characteristic, it is best to start with a heterogeneous group and let the group experience the extent to which certain areas of communication are or are not inhibited by the presence of others. Because authority relationships and level of intimacy are primary cultural dimensions, the process of group selection *with insiders* will itself reveal some important elements of the culture. The consultant/facilitator should use his or her interactions with members of the client system as diagnostic data throughout this planning process.

After groups have been chosen, the formal leader should inform the groups of the purpose of the meetings, review his or her conversations with the facilitator, and explain the basis on which people were chosen to attend. Just being summoned to a meeting to do a culture assessment is too vague. The participants must know what change problems are being worked on, and they must become aware that the leaders are committed to the assessment process. The leader should emphasize that openness and candor are needed, and that culture is not good or bad.

Step Three: Selecting an Appropriate Setting for the Group Self-Assessment

The group meeting should stimulate perceptions, thoughts, and feelings that are ordinarily implicit. The room in which the meeting is to be held must therefore be comfortable, allow people to sit in a circular format, and permit the hanging of many sheets of flip chart paper on which cultural elements will be written. In addition there should be available a set of breakout rooms in which subgroups can meet, especially if the basic group is larger than fifteen or so participants.

Step Four: Explaining the Purpose of the Group Meeting (15 mins.)

The meeting should start with a statement of the purpose of the meeting by someone from the organization who is perceived to be in a leadership or authority role, so that openness of response is encouraged. The organizational change problem should be clearly stated and written down, allowing for questions and discussion. The purpose of this step is not only to be clear as to *why* this meeting is being held but also to begin to get the group involved in the process.

The insider then introduces the process consultant as the “facilitator who will help us to conduct an assessment of how our organization’s culture will help or constrain us in solving the problem or resolving the issue we have identified.” The process consultant can be an outsider, a member of the organization who is part of a staff group devoted to providing internal consulting services, or even a leader from another department *if* he or she is familiar with how culture works and is familiar with this group process.

Step Five: A Short Lecture on How to Think About Culture (15 mins.)

It is essential for the group to understand that culture manifests itself at the level of artifacts and espoused values, but that the goal is to try to decipher the shared tacit assumptions that lie at a lower level of consciousness. The consultant should, therefore, present the three-level model of assumptions, espoused values, and basic assumptions shown in Chapter Two, and ensure that everyone understands that culture is a learned set of assumptions based on a group’s shared history. It is important for the group to understand that what they are about to assess is a product of *their own history* and that the culture’s stability rests on the organization’s *past success*.

Step Six: Eliciting Descriptions of the Artifacts (60 mins.)

The process consultant then tells the group that they are going to start by describing the culture through its *artifacts*. A useful way to begin is to find out who has joined the group most recently and ask that person what it felt like to enter the organization and what she or he noticed most upon

entering it. Everything mentioned is written down on a flip chart, and as the pages are filled, they are torn off and hung on the wall so that everything remains visible.

If group members are active in supplying information, the facilitator can stay relatively quiet, but if the group needs priming, the facilitator should suggest categories such as dress codes, desired modes of behavior in addressing the boss, the physical layout of the workplace, how time and space are used, what kinds of emotions someone would notice, how people get rewarded and punished, how someone gets ahead in the organization, how decisions are made, how conflicts and disagreements are handled, how work and family life are balanced, and so forth. The facilitator can use the categories reviewed in Chapters Five and Six to ensure that many different area of how things are done in the organization get discussed, but it is important *not* to give out such a list before a spontaneous group discussion has occurred because it may bias the group's perception of what is important. The consultant does not know initially what areas of the culture are especially salient and relevant and so should not bias the process of deciphering by providing a checklist. Noting later what areas do *not* come out spontaneously can itself be an indicator of cultural characteristics that are important but difficult to talk about.

This process should continue for about one hour or until the group clearly runs dry, and it should produce a long list of artifacts covering all sorts of areas of the group's life. Being visually surrounded by the description of their own artifacts is a necessary condition for the group to begin to stimulate its own deeper layers of thinking about what assumptions its members share.

Step Seven: Identifying Espoused Values (15-30 mins.)

The question that elicits artifacts is "*What* is going on here?" By contrast, the question that elicits espoused values is "*Why* are you doing what you are doing?" It is often the case that values will already have been mentioned during the discussion of artifacts so these should be written down on different pages. To elicit further values, I pick an area of artifacts that is clearly of interest to the group and ask people to articulate the reasons why they do what they do. For example, if they have said that the place is very informal