



work / life strategy

Issue 3

Using Organizational Culture to Develop a Work/Life Strategy

USING ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE TO DEVELOP A WORK/LIFE STRATEGY

Organizational culture is an issue that is seldom discussed in organizations. It is so intrinsic to the way an organization thinks and functions that few ever take the time to define it. Yet research shows that the most successful companies have distinct cultures that they leverage to drive their success. Culture is at the core of how an organization thinks and responds, and employees who understand the organization's values are more likely to respond appropriately in doing their jobs. Those who embrace a clearly defined culture will become engaged and integrated employees who will be highly effective at work and will understand the appropriate ways to balance their work and personal lives within the accepted parameters of the organization's culture. Eliminating ambiguity and expressing a clear vision about your culture provides focus and direction and can empower your employees to develop their own work/life strategy.

UNDERSTANDING CULTURE

Your culture is unique to your organization because it has developed over time with the evolution of the organization. Edgar Schein, a nationally recognized expert on organizational culture, defines culture as:

"A pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group has learned as it solved its problems of external adaptations and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct ways to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems." (Edgar H. Schein, Organizational Culture and Leadership, 2004, Jossey-Bass)

Furthermore, your culture is unique to your organization because it has evolved independently of other companies and has, therefore, developed very specific ways of responding to situations. While overall values may be similar, specific organizational values are a result of your organization's history, and your competitive power lies in defining that culture and using it to propel your organization to a higher level.

But the true value of understanding culture is realized as your organization seeks to improve its work processes. Any organization that is striving to improve its processes must focus on evolving its culture to support the desired change. Without a strategic plan to change your culture, your improvement strategies are likely to fail.

"This dependence of organizational improvement on culture change is due to the fact that when the values, orientations, definitions, and goals stay constant – even when procedures and strategies are altered – organizations return quickly to the status quo.... Without an alternation of the fundamental goals, values, and expectations of the organizations or individuals, change remains superficial and short-term in duration (see Quinn, 1996)... Modifying organizational culture, in other words, is a key to the successful implementation of major improvement strategies (e.g. TQM, downsizing, reengineering) as well as adaptation to the increasing turbulent environment faced by modern organizations." (Cameron & Quinn, "Diagnosing and Changing Organizational Culture", 1999)

Defining your current culture is therefore the first step in developing a plan to change your culture



to support process improvement strategies. Most companies fail to recognize this fact and develop process improvement strategies that do not address the intrinsic cultural issues that will ultimately become impediments to the change.

DIAGNOSING CULTURE

There are several tools that can be used to define your culture and help you in refining your culture to meet your changing business demands. These tools range from self-diagnostic tools to sophisticated programs that must be applied by organizational consultants and have been developed by Cameron & Quinn, Lominger, The Banff Centre, and others. The more sophisticated the tool, the more valuable the information that your organization can derive from the study, and some of these tools may already be used by your human resources department.

For the purpose of this article, we will focus on the simple tools that you can use to diagnose your own culture and what they can tell you about your work/life strategy. One such tool has been developed by Cameron and Quinn in their book, *Diagnosing and Changing Organizational Culture*. The book is a fairly simplistic look at organizational culture, but it offers a tool to help organizations diagnose their culture and begin the process of evolving it to support changing business demands. Cameron and Quinn's research suggests that most organizations fit within four distinct cultures: clan, hierarchy, market and adhocracy. A clan culture is one that is internally focused and operates like a family with a clearly defined leadership that has a benevolent attitude toward its employees. A hierarchical culture is one that responds to a need for consistent and predictable work processes and products and creates a structure that generates dependable results. A market culture is externally oriented

and focused on client needs, and it is driven by winning in the marketplace. An adhocracy is a culture driven by innovation, and it is focused on creating new ideas that will draw customers to it. Most organizations have aspects of each of these cultures as part of their organization, but one aspect will generally dominate the culture. Cameron and Quinn offer a simple questionnaire that can be used to diagnose your current culture and to define your desired culture. They also offer a tool to plot your current culture and overlay it with your desired culture so you can develop a strategy to change your organization. By using this diagnostic tool, you can help focus your organization's cultural vision and begin moving it in the right direction.

WORK/LIFE STRATEGY AND CULTURE

To put this tool to use in developing a work/life strategy, you can identify the basic characteristics of the culture you want to foster and determine which work/life strategies your current or desired culture would support. For example, a clan culture as a family-like organization would likely focus on individual development and commitment and would encourage mentoring and training for its employees to expand their capabilities. It would also be more inclined to provide services to their employees to help them take care of their families while they are at work and might provide child and adult daycare services. A hierarchical culture with its focus on consistency and predictability might give its employees improved technology to do their jobs more effectively so they can produce more in less time. This culture might also provide in-house food services that also provide carry-out food for evening meals to support their employees at home as an equitable amenity. A market culture focused on winning in the marketplace would be more inclined to provide its employees the ability



to work virtually so that they can accomplish what they need to wherever it is most effective to serve the needs of the client. This culture also might be more inclined to provide fitness facilities for their people to keep them healthy and focused on winning. And an adhocracy culture with its focus on innovation and creativity would encourage flexible scheduling to allow employees to work when they are most creative. This culture might provide bundled amenities for their employees to help them manage their personal lives on their varying schedules. As you can see, the strategies that support work/life balance must be appropriate within the culture of an organization in order to be accepted and effective.

EXPRESSING YOUR CULTURE IN YOUR WORKPLACE

Once you have defined your culture, you can develop a strategy to use your workplace as a tool to communicate your cultural values. Along with providing the right types of spaces to support your culture and your work/life strategy, branding your workplace to express your culture is an effective way to communicate your values to your employees and visitors. Again using the four basic cultures as an example, a clan culture might brand its workplace with images of its employees in activities outside the office that are reflect each individual's personal values. A hierarchical culture might brand its workplace with awards for quality and consistency of product. A market culture might brand its workplace with images of successful sales leaders and testimonials from satisfied customers. And an adhocracy culture might brand its workplace with legacy images of innovative ideas that propelled the organization forward. Expressing these values reminds all who pass through your space of what is important to your organization and communicates what to expect from you.

With a clearly defined culture and a focus on where your organization is moving, you can use your culture and your work/life strategy as a differentiator in recruiting and retaining employees. A clearly expressed vision and set of values will become a sales tool giving your organization a unique personality that prospects can understand and embrace. With clarity of vision, you are more likely to successfully recruit and retain the right employees to drive your organization. And a workplace that reflects your culture and work/life strategy will reinforce visually what you communicate verbally giving greater credence to your recruiting message.

Your culture is one of the most valuable assets your organization has. Defining it and refining it are keys to your success and an important step in establishing a work/life strategy that will be effective in propelling your company forward.

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