

Observe Your Organizational Culture

It is difficult for people to assess and understand their own culture. When people are at work on a daily basis, many of the manifestations of culture become almost invisible. Assessing your organizational culture is a lot like trying to tell someone how to tie their shoes. Once you've been tying your own shoes every day for years and years, it is hard to describe the process to another person. You can obtain a picture of your current organizational culture in several ways. To participate in the assessment of your organizational culture, you must:

Try to be an impartial observer of your culture in action. Look at the employees and their interaction in your organization with the eye of an outsider. Pretend you are an anthropologist observing a group that you have never seen before.

Watch for emotions. Emotions are indications of values. People do not get excited or upset about things that are unimportant to them. Examine conflicts closely, for the same reason.

Look at the objects and artifacts that sit on desks and hang on walls. Observe common areas and furniture arrangements.

When you observe and interact with employees, **watch for things that are not there.** If nobody mentions something that you think is important (like the customers), that is interesting information. It will help you understand your organization's culture.

You can assess your current organizational culture in several ways:

Participate in a Culture Walk

One way to observe the culture in your organization is to take a walk around the building, and look at some of the physical signs of culture.

- How is the space allocated? Where are the offices located?
- How much space is given to whom? Where are people located?
- What is posted on bulletin boards or displayed on walls?
- What is displayed on desks or in other areas of the building? In the work groups? On lockers or walls?
- How are common areas utilized?
- What do people write to one another? What is said in memos or email? What is the tone of messages (formal or informal, pleasant or hostile, etc.)? How often do people communicate with one another? Is all communication written, or do people communicate verbally?
- What interaction between employees do you see? How much emotion is expressed during the interaction?

These are just a few of the questions to answer when you observe and assess your organizational culture. Take a culture walk frequently to observe organizational culture in action.

Culture Interviews

Another way to understand the culture of your organization is to interview your employees in small groups. It is just as important, during these interviews, to observe the behaviors and interaction patterns of people as it is to hear what they say about the culture.

Since it is usually difficult for people to put into words what the culture is like, indirect questions will gain the most information. The following are examples of indirect questions you can ask during a culture interview.

- What would you tell a friend about your organization if he or she was about to start working here?
- What is the one thing you would most like to change about this organization?
- Who is a hero around here? Why?
- What is your favorite characteristic that is present in your company?
- What kinds of people fail in your organization?
- What is your favorite question to ask a candidate for a job in your company?

Culture Surveys

Written surveys taken by people in the organization can also provide information about the organizational culture. It is important to create or select the survey using the information collected during the culture walk and the culture interviews.

You can either purchase or custom design a survey. An off-the-shelf survey may have interesting questions on it; it may also have questions which are not relevant to your organization. It has been used in a number of other organizations, though, so the questions may be reliable and validated.

These are ways in which you can observe and understand your organizational culture. The results of your assessment of your organizational culture will tell you what to do more of, less of, stop, or start. The results from your organizational culture assessment will either confirm the efficacy of the culture you have or provide the encouragement you need to change your organizational culture.