

Creating a Lasting Organizational Culture

We frequently talk about the importance of developing a club culture in our organizations. What exactly do we mean by an organizational culture?

The dictionary defines “culture” as *the sum total of ways of living built up by a group of human beings and transmitted from one generation to another*. With a slight modification of this definition we come up with the following working definition of organizational culture.

The sum total ways of working and interacting built up by a group of people within an organization and transmitted from one generation of employees to another.

The major benefit of establishing an organizational culture is that once adopted by the majority of people in an organization the culture takes on a life of its own and permeates the workplace. As normal turnover takes place, new hires quickly learn that to be accepted in their new surroundings, they must embrace the culture and make it their own.

In the absence of a culture developed and disseminated by the organization’s leadership, a culture will arise on its own, usually fostered by a vocal few and often cynical and at odds with the purpose of the organization.

So how do you create a culture in your organization? First, you have to define clearly and succinctly the aims of your organization and what it aspires to be. These are most often found in Mission and Vision Statements. Beyond these basic statements of intent, one must clearly spell out standards of behavior and performance. These can be in the form of Guiding Principles, Operating Standards, Leadership Principles, Service Ethic, Principles of Employee Relations, Organizational Values, Service Pocket Cards, a Code of Professional Ethics, or any other formal statements describing the “What, How’s, and Why’s” of how organizational business should be conducted.

Yet publishing such principles and statements, no matter how inspirational and well-written, will only foster employee cynicism if the values are not enthusiastically embraced by the organization’s leadership. On the other hand, when leadership demonstrates their commitment to the organization’s values by their daily example, employees will do likewise.

With well-defined values and the enthusiastic example of leaders, the ground has been prepared for the fruits of organizational culture, but just as in growing a garden, preparing the soil is only the first step. The real work for a successful harvest is the daily tending – watering, fertilizing, pruning, weeding, and pest control. In the case of an organizational culture, it is daily

Eight Steps to a Lasting Culture

1. *Define and embrace values.*
2. *Set the example.*
3. *Constantly and enthusiastically remind and reinforce – especially to subordinate leaders.*
4. *Indoctrinate new hires into culture.*
5. *Praise and reward those who uphold and foster the culture.*
6. *Correct and counsel those who don’t. Terminate as necessary.*
7. *Do not let anyone disparage or ignore the culture – especially subordinate leaders.*
8. *Preach the message at every opportunity.*

reinforcement at every opportunity with all employees that continues to focus individual attention on the values that underlie everyone's efforts. In some cases, it's publicly recognizing an employee for embracing and utilizing the values in their work relationships or service rendered to customers. In other cases, it's privately correcting an employee who has ignored or transgressed the culture. In extreme cases, it's terminating the employee who refuses to accept the group norm. The key is to continually remind employees of the organization's values and elevate them from words on a page to an animating spirit that permeates every aspect of the organization and its work.

From the process of continually accentuating and reminding one achieves a breakthrough similar to that described in Jim Collins' book, *Good to Great*.

“Sustainable transformations follow a predictable pattern of buildup and breakthrough. Like pushing on a giant, heavy flywheel, it takes a lot of effort to get the thing moving at all, but with persistent pushing in a consistent direction over a long period of time, the flywheel builds momentum, eventually hitting a point of breakthrough.”

This breakthrough is reached when the organization achieves a critical mass of employee buy-in. Though the process of establishing an organizational culture requires patience and persistence as well as leadership and example, when breakthrough is achieved, the culture takes over and is self-sustaining – with the employees holding the bar high and policing their own ranks.

In such an organization, employees understand what must be done and how. Motivation and morale are sky-high as employees are empowered by their participation and contribution. The leader, relieved of the burden of constantly following behind employees to ensure they are doing the right things, can focus on strategic issues and the future of the organization.

The importance of a well-defined and promoted organizational culture cannot be overemphasized or underestimated in its impact on quality, performance, and customer service. The only thing that can screw it up is for the leader to fail to show an ongoing interest or set an uncompromising example of the organizational culture and its values.

Ed Rehkopf, Club Resources International