The Role of the Board in Managing Organisational Culture | Whitepaper

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INTERNATIONAL

Introduction

"Culture touches every aspect of the organization: strategy, business processes, employees… it's in everything we do."[1]

Organisational culture and the Board

More and more we are being asked about the role of the Board of Directors in the management of organisational culture – regarding the impact the Board has on culture and how the Board can help shape a desired culture.

Interest in organisational culture right now is very high, not just in Australia and New Zealand, but around the world.

The 2008 global financial crisis opened the world's eyes to the lack of control systems and the almost cavalier attitude of some financial organisations to the management of risk. Investigations reported on the 'attitudes towards risk' and 'cultures that reinforced and rewarded quantity over quality' with little regard for the longer term consequences. The failures of these organisations have highlighted the importance of good governance from the Board in such matters.

In Australia the HIH Insurance collapse in 2001 was a very visible example of this well before the financial crisis.

As a consequence of what happened in the lead up to the financial crisis, regulatory bodies have focused a dramatic public spotlight on 'risk culture' as a way of helping ensure the possibility of further financial crisis is minimised.

- APRA has stated "*APRA's overarching objective is for regulated institutions to establish and maintain sound risk cultures that are aligned with their organisational objectives, values and risk appetite.*"[2] They have clearly defined how they see risk culture and made it a priority of their regulatory oversight.

- ASIC states "*ASIC is concerned about culture because it is a key driver of conduct within the financial industry. By focusing more on culture, we expect to get early warning signs where things might be going wrong.*"[3]

- ICAC has contributed to the discussion by linking organisational culture with ethical behaviour and corruption.[4]

The Australian Institute of Company Directors has pointed out that under the Commonwealth Criminal Code, Directors can be criminally liable for a lack of a 'compliance culture'. They also point out that whilst over the last 20 years there has been only one court judgement that has referred to criminal liability, the courts have often considered corporate culture in determining the penalty for breaches of regulatory provisions.[5]

> Boards need to understand their role in organisational culture. To understand how to manage and influence something, it's a good idea to first understand what it is that you are attempting to manage.

It's also worth noting that new occupational health and safety legislation emphasises Directors responsibilities in creating a 'safety culture' throughout the organisation.

What is Culture?

"The shared values, norms and expectations that govern the way people approach their work and interact with each other."

There are several parts of this definition – each highlighting an important aspect of organisational culture:

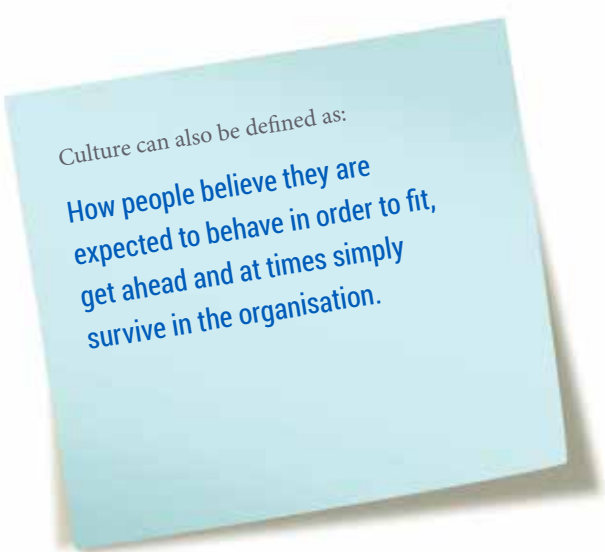|	
Values	Values dictate what is important in any group. What has 'value' gets done. Whilst most organisations have a set of stated values, these are often not reflected in what is really 'valued' in the organisation.
Norms	Norms are the written and unwritten rules about how people should behave. Every group has norms – at the societal level, at the family level, at the organisational level and at the team level.
Expectations	Expectations reflect what messages people get about how they should behave. From these messages they make conclusions about how they should behave from observing how their managers behave and seeing what gets rewarded and punished.
Governs	These values, norms and expectations do not lead to a conscious choice that people make. They 'govern' the way people behave – exercising a guiding and restricting influence over how people should behave. Often individuals will not want to behave that way, but the culture dictates that they must, so they feel that they have no choice.
Approach their work	How people go about solving problems, making decisions, achieving goals, responding to deadlines, processing ideas and information, meeting compliance, safety and quality requirements etc.
Interact with each other	For example when people need to work in teams, build relationships, work cross-functionally, share ideas and information, lead, follow and communicate etc.

How does this play out?

- What happens when someone deals with a customer?
- What happens when mistakes are made?
- What happens when problems arise?
- What happens when priorities need to change?
- How does information flow around the organisation?
- What happens when decisions need to be made?
- What happens when unsafe work practices are 'easier' than the safe approach?
- How do we handle people who are 'different'?
- What do I have to do to get noticed?
- How do we treat our suppliers?
- How do we treat each other?

From a Board perspective:

- The relationship between culture and strategy as the former drives the ability to execute the latter
- How executives behave when attending Board meetings
- How effectively Board papers are prepared and how helpful they are to Board members
- How Board members behave during Board meetings
- Communication (written and face-to-face) between executives and Board members

Research shows that culture has significant role to play in:

- Strategy execution
- Profitability
- Productivity
- Safety
- Innovation
- Risk management
- Sustainability
- Customer service
- Quality of product/service
- Long term growth
- Employee engagement
- Teamwork and coordination

Culture can also be defined as:

How people believe they are expected to behave in order to fit, get ahead and at times simply survive in the organisation.

What Culture is not!

Organisational Culture is not just another word for organisational climate.

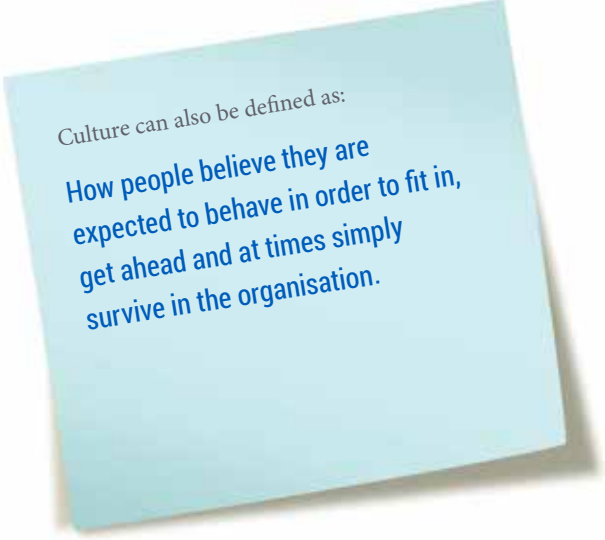**Organisational Climate** is made up of two variables:

- How people feel about being part of the organisation. This includes employee engagement, satisfaction and other individual level outcomes of culture.

- What people think they see going on in the organisation. This includes teamwork, influence, clarity of purpose, perceptions of fairness and equity, diversity management etc.

Organisational Culture focuses more on how people believe they are expected to behave.

This includes the norms and expectations of behaviour guiding people in terms of how they should deal with situations as they arise in their day to day work.

The key difference is that Organisational Climate is about perceptions and feelings, whilst Organisational Culture is about behaviour.

Whilst these may be two separate phenomena within the organisation, it must be noted that they are related. Aspects of Organisational Climate influence Organisational Culture (eg; perceived levels of influence) whilst others are outcomes of culture (eg; employee engagement).

Culture can also be defined as:

How people believe they are expected to behave in order to fit in, get ahead and at times simply survive in the organisation.

Organisational Culture is not the same as employee engagement.

Employee engagement seems to have captured everyone's imagination right now. Either through traditional engagement surveys or newer pulse type measures, many organisations seem to be measuring engagement. From an oversight perspective it is important that executives and Board members understand that engagement is not the same as culture. It does not cause culture. It is not a substitute for culture.

Experience has shown that it is possible to have very high engagement with a destructive culture. Enron was the classic case of this. People loved working for Enron. The company was outstandingly successful. People even wrote books about how great they were. This high level of engagement and the media's love affair with its success masked a severely dysfunctional aggressive culture that pursued profit at any cost with total disregard for longer term consequences and any semblance of risk management. The rest as they say, is history.

These elements of organisational life are like an iceberg – climate is above the surface, it is easy to see and it is easy to understand. Culture is like the part of the iceberg that is under the water – it is hard to see, it is not obvious, and yet it represents 90% of the critical mass of the ice mountain and dictates how the iceberg responds to ocean currents.

The Role of the Board

*"It's the Board's responsibility – we are the conscience of the company,
we provide an outsider view of whether (the) company is healthy.
We have a moral responsibility."*[6]

As the Australian Institute of Company Directors clearly states: "*The Board, which sits at the apex of the organisational hierarchy, with ultimate authority and accountability for the organisation, is part of the organisation's leadership along with executive management, and therefore must have a role in forming and monitoring the culture.*"[7]

Issues relevant to the Board include:

- Governance and management of culture at an organisational wide level
- How the Board helps shape the organisation's culture
- The culture in the Boardroom

Governance and management of culture at an organisational wide level

Clearly the role of the Board member is a little different for non-executive Directors than executive Directors. Executive Directors do not need to be so mindful of the distinction between governance and management, and their role is absolutely one of leadership in the creation, maintenance and any required change regarding the organisation's culture.

As the Australian Institute of Company Directors quite rightly points out, non-executive Directors cannot leave culture to management alone, as this "*fails to recognise the board's leadership position…..and fails to recognise that the executive members of the leadership group will be living the culture and be enmeshed in it.*"[8]

For non-executive Directors, like much of their role, their task is one of oversight. In the same vein as strategy, regulatory compliance and fiduciary responsibility, the Board member's role is best described as one of getting on top of data and information – understanding the current culture and the implications this has for strategy and regulatory requirements (risk, safety etc). Directors need to know and understand the current culture. This requires information – data that Board can use for reference purposes. This can be obtained through qualitative or quantitative (preferably both) data gathering involving surveys, observing how executives behave (in an effort to deduce what the norms may be) and observing and listening to comments made by staff during any on-site visits.

If a Board member or the Board as a whole does not believe that the current culture is one that is appropriate for executing the current or a planned new strategy, then the usual Board mechanisms should be in place to raise this and discuss it at the Board level.

The most obvious way in which the Board contributes to the management of the organisation's culture (norms) is through the appointment of and management of the CEO. How the Board goes about selecting a new CEO who aligns with the desired culture and strategy underpins the future of the organisation's culture. How the Board then goes about dealing with the CEO, communicating with him/her on a regular basis and how members work with the CEO to ensure that culture and strategy are on track has significant impact on the behavioural norms that constitute the organisation's culture.

The Board also impacts the organisation's culture through Board committees such as the remuneration and risk committees. Since 'reward' is a major driver of culture, how the Board chooses to remunerate and/or incentivise the CEO has major impact on how other levels throughout the organisation are then 'rewarded'. Does the reward system drive short-term or long-term thinking and behaviour? What actual behaviours are being rewarded through the remuneration system?

How the Board helps shape the organisation's culture

As above, the Board has direct impact on shaping the organisation's behavioural norms/culture through management of the CEO and their thinking behind such organisational systems as remuneration and rewards.

There's an old saying – "what gets rewarded gets done". So the Board sets the context for the organisation's culture by selecting how the CEO is rewarded. The Board also sets the context for culture by 'rewarding' or 'punishing' the CEO's behaviour. For example acceptance of a very aggressive CEO's behaviour gives permission for the rest of the organisation to behave aggressively towards each other and these become the organisational norms.

There is also another old saying – "what gets measured gets managed". That may well be true (or not) but the more important old saying within this is – "what gets measured is obviously important". The KPI's selected and criteria set for measuring these, sends signals about what is actually important. So the Board also helps shape the organisation's culture through the selection of performance criteria and measures chosen to review performance towards these.

Then the Board further helps shape culture through their own behaviour as Board members on the various Board sub-committees. As the senior person 'in the room' the Board member's own behaviour sets an example to executives regarding what behaviour is acceptable or not. Like all leaders, in this context the Board member is a 'role model'.

Culture can also be defined as:

How people believe they are expected to behave in order to fit, get ahead and at times simply survive in the organisation.

The culture in the Boardroom

The Boardroom itself has an operating culture that influences how members and attending executives behave. Like all groups the Board has its own norms around how to behave, defining what behaviour is acceptable (gets rewarded) and what behaviour is unacceptable (gets punished or does not get rewarded).

The Board acts as a role model for the rest of the organisation. The way the Board interacts with executives and each other – how challenges to the status quo are dealt with, how new information is processed, how dissention and conflict is resolved and how decisions get made all impact on the culture of the Board and thus the organisation.

Measuring Organisational Culture

Giving Boards and top executives practical information on their organisations culture to help them make a real difference in how their organisations perform.

Culture does not need to be seen as something that is 'airy fairy'. It can be observed, it can be described, it can be quantified and it can be measured. It can be defined and it can be changed.

Human Synergistics has been researching organisational culture for over 30 years. Our Organisational Culture Inventory® (OCI®) is the most used culture survey tool of its type in the world. It measures the behavioural norms that prevail within the organisation, in terms of what behaviours are rewarded and reinforced through the organisation's structures, systems, job design, communication processes and leadership approaches. The OCI® Ideal can be used to establish a view on what type of culture would best help the organisation execute its strategy and the OCI® Actual measures the actual operating culture.

The accompanying Organisational Effectiveness Inventory® (OEI) measures the impact the organisation's structures, systems, job design, communication and leadership processes have on culture and how effectively they are working to achieve the ideal culture.

Through this the Board and senior executives can easily identify the gap between ideal and actual culture, what is causing the culture to be as it is and where they need to focus their efforts to achieve the desired culture.

In Australia and New Zealand this approach has been used by:

- ASX and NZX top 20 listed companies
- Banks and Insurance companies for risk management
- Mining, manufacturing and infrastructure companies for safety management
- Government organisations – both central and local to ensure operating effectiveness
- FMCGs for culture – strategy fit
- SMEs as a check on the impact of culture on performance
- NFPs and voluntary organisations to identify inhibitors to performance
- Educational organisations (including universities) to identify performance issues and hundreds of other organisations.

Human Synergistics works with major universities around the world and through our own Center for Applied Research (Chicago) we continue to be at the frontier of research into organisational culture. Our commitment to ongoing research helps ensure that organisations using our tools are focusing on what really matters – that they are putting their efforts into change/improvement initiatives that will make a difference and will result in improved performance.

Creating a picture of current culture and tracking progress over time

The Human Synergistics Circumplex provides a graphical representation based on survey data of the organisation's Ideal Culture and Actual Operating Culture. Using the Circumplex to graph the survey data, the organisation clearly sees it's Ideal and Actual cultures, along with the gaps between the two:

The Boardroom itself has an operating culture that influences how members and attending executives behave. Like all groups the Board has its own norms around how to behave, defining what behaviour is acceptable (gets rewarded) and what behaviour is unacceptable (gets punished or does not get rewarded).

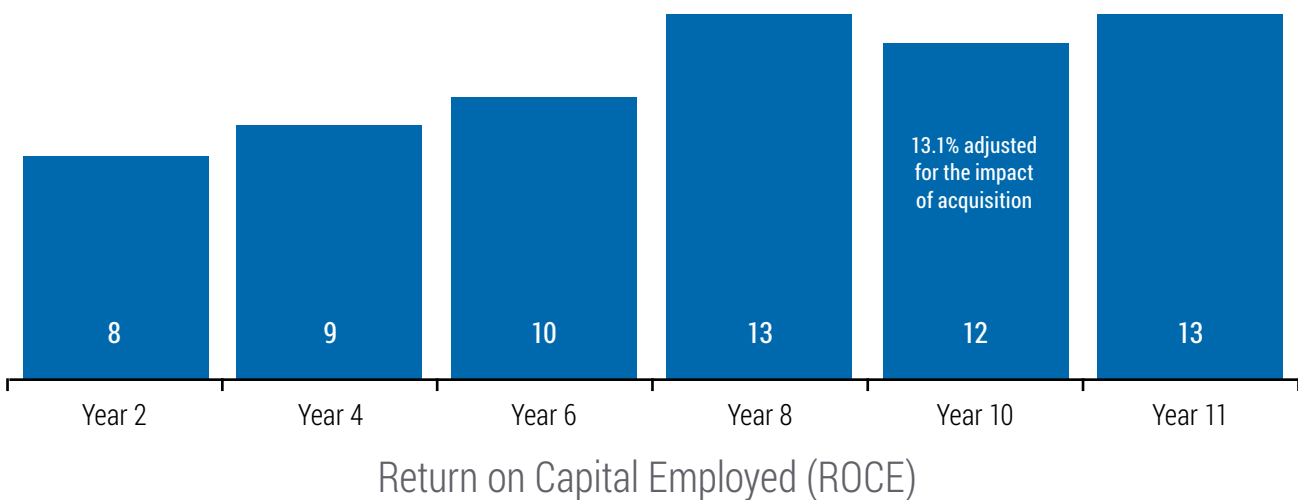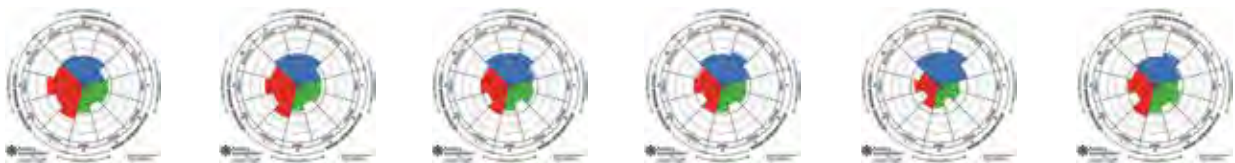**IDEAL CULTURE**   **ACTUAL CULTURE**
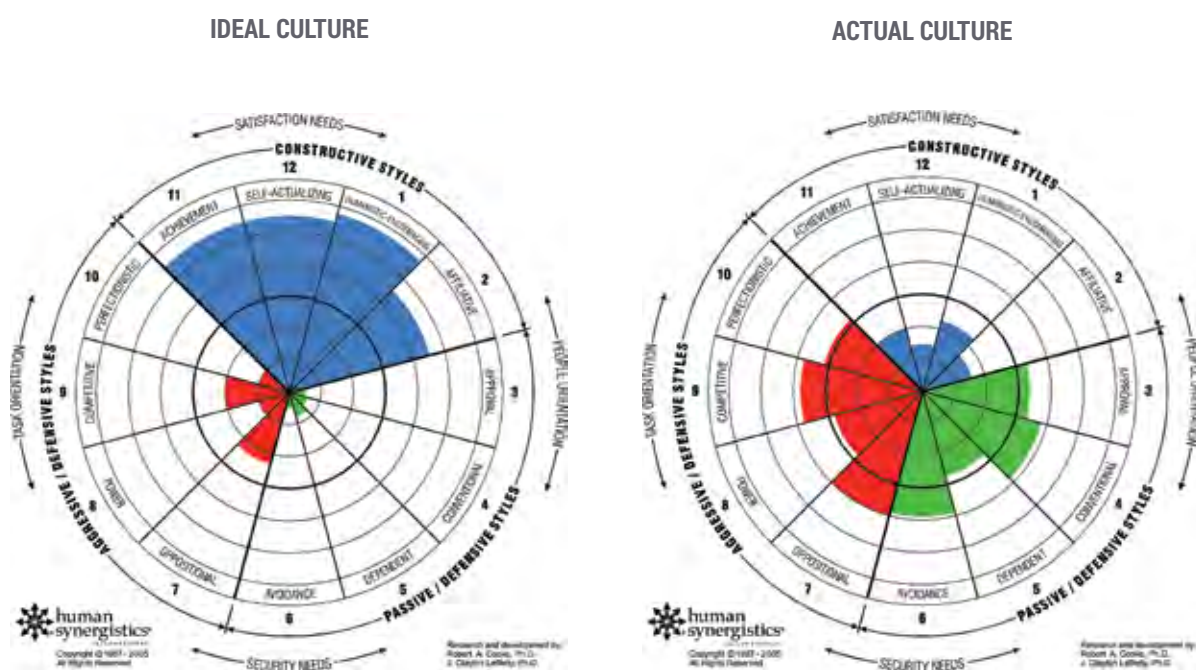
Human Synergistics Circumplex by Robert A. Cooke, Ph.D., and J. Clayton Lafferty, Ph.D., Copyright © 1973 - 2016. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

As the organisation then introduces new structures, systems, job design, communication processes and leadership approaches to shape their culture to get closer to the ideal, they can track progress over time.

Following is an example of an ASX listed company who not only shaped a culture that is very much like their ideal, they also tracked changes in their share price and ROCE over time, linking these to culture change.

Historical links of Company X culture and marketplace success

3.58	3.69	5.17	7.38	8.1	9.27	12.22
Year 1	Year 2	Year 4	Year 6	Year 8	Year 10	Year 11

Share price

8	9	10	13	12	13
Year 2	Year 4	Year 6	Year 8	Year 10	Year 11

13.1% adjusted for the impact of acquisition

Return on Capital Employed (ROCE)
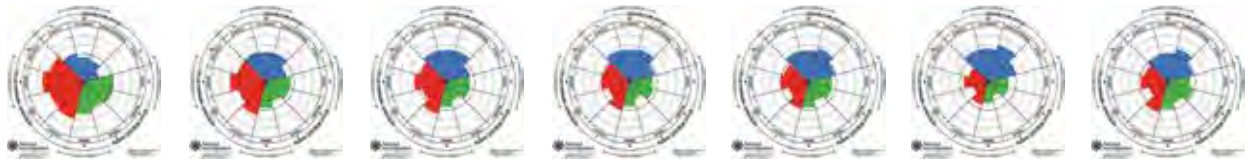
What a high performing culture looks like

Actual organisational culture profile of an Australian company recognised for its innovative approach.

An organisational culture that enables innovation builds behavioural norms and expectations of its members to behave in Constructive ways:

- Set challenging goals and develop plans to meet these goals. Strive for excellence and explore alternatives before acting. Think in terms of cause and effect and take on challenging tasks and use good problem solving skills. *This is plotted at 11 in the circumplex – **Achievement**.*

- Value creativity and quality over quantity. Learn and grow and take on new and interesting tasks. Enjoy your work. Do even simple tasks well and put your unique stamp on the job. *This is plotted at 12 in the circumplex – **Self-Actualizing**.*

- Be supportive of others, encourage others to learn and grow. Help others think for themselves. Be open to the influence of others and resolve conflicts constructively. *This is plotted at 1 in the circumplex – **Humanistic-Encouraging**.*

- Build strong relationships. Be friendly, approachable and open with others. Show concern for people, cooperate with others and treat people as more important than things. Think about the team's needs. *This is plotted at 2 in the circumplex – **Affiliative**.*

Along with these Constructive behavioural norms, there are minimum requirements to behave in ways that reflect either the Passive/Defensive or Aggressive/Defensive behavioural norms.
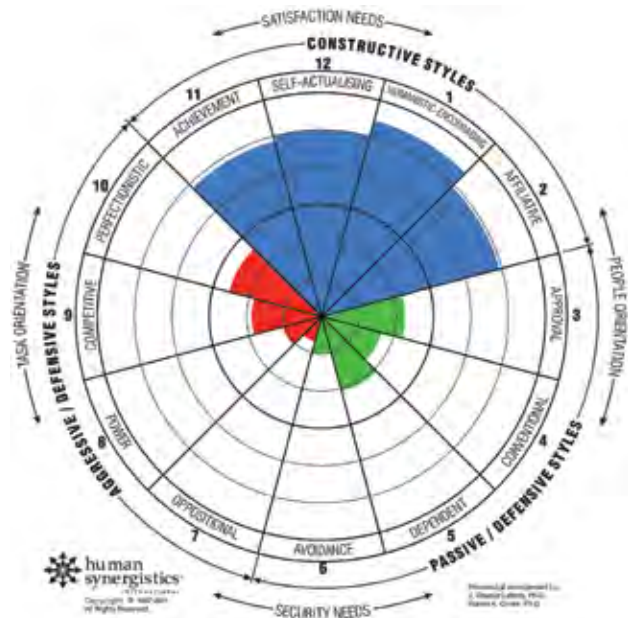
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What a culture that inhibits performance looks like.

Actual organisational culture profile of an Australian company struggling to keep itself relevant.

An organisational culture that inhibits innovation builds behavioural norms and expectations of its members to behave in Passive/Defensive and or Aggressive/Defensive ways:

Passive/Defensive:

- Avoid conflict and keep relationships superficially pleasant. Be liked by others and gain approval before acting. *This is plotted at 3 in the circumplex – **Approval**.*

- Follow rules, conform and don't 'rock the boat'. Make a good impression and always follow policies and procedures. *This is plotted at 4 in the circumplex – **Conventional**.*

- Clear all decisions with superiors, please those in positions of authority and ask everyone what they think before acting. *This is plotted at 5 in the circumplex – **Dependent**.*

- Avoid blame and shift responsibilities to others. Push decision upwards, take few chances and lay low when things get tough. T*his is plotted at 6 in the circumplex – **Avoidance**.*

Aggressive/Defensive:

- Gain influence by being critical and oppose the ideas of others. Find fault and focus on why ideas won't work. *This is plotted at 7 in the circumplex – **Oppositional**.*

- Take charge and be controlling (managers). Act forceful and tough and play politics to gain influence. T*his is plotted at 8 in the circumplex – **Power**.*

- Compete rather than cooperate. Turn the job into a contest and out-perform your peers. *This is plotted at 9 in the circumplex – **Competitive**.*

- Avoid all mistakes and work long hard hours to pursue narrowly defined objectives and do things perfectly. *This is plotted at 10 in the circumplex – **Perfectionistic**.*

Along with these Constructive behavioural norms, there are minimum requirements to behave in ways that reflect either the Passive/Defensive or Aggressive/Defensive behavioural norms.

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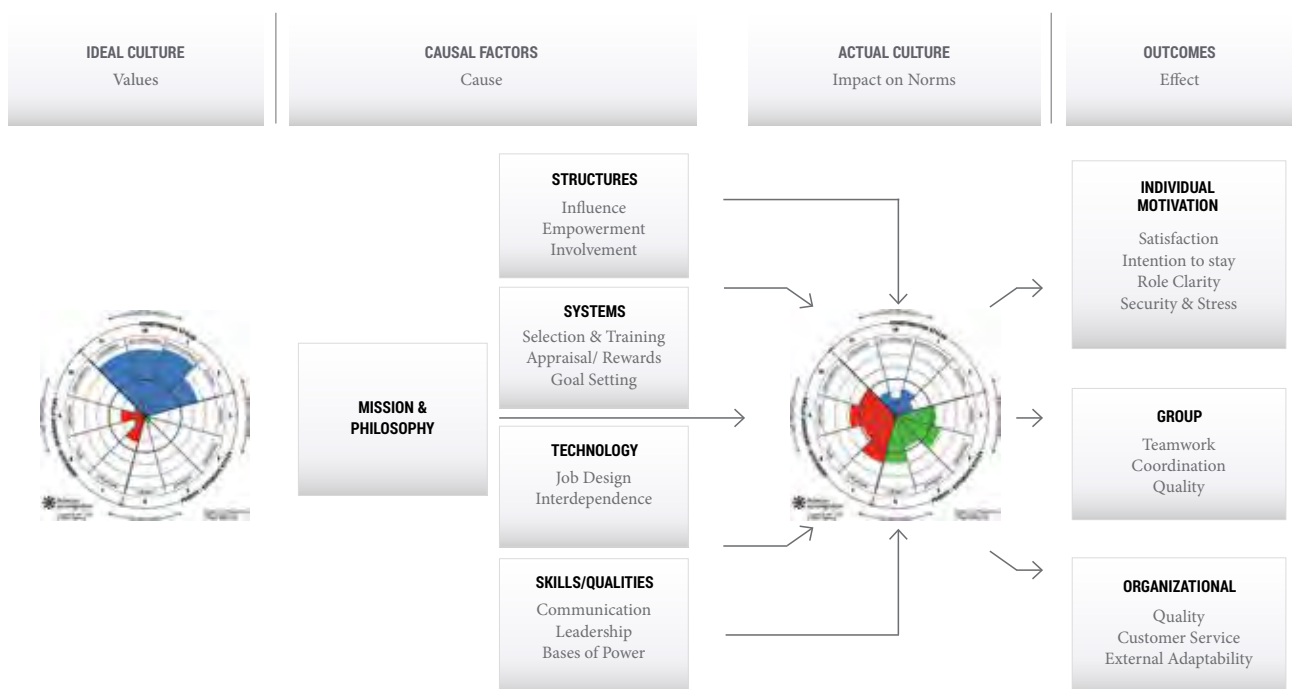
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How does Culture work?

Given that an organisation's culture represents the shared behavioural norms regarding how people believe they are expected to behave, we now need to shed some light on how organisations create such expectations.

IDEAL CULTURE	CAUSAL FACTORS	ACTUAL CULTURE	OUTCOMES
Values	Cause	Impact on Norms	Effect

MISSION & PHILOSOPHY

STRUCTURES
Influence
Empowerment
Involvement

SYSTEMS
Selection & Training
Appraisal/ Rewards
Goal Setting

TECHNOLOGY
Job Design
Interdependence

SKILLS/QUALITIES
Communication
Leadership
Bases of Power

INDIVIDUAL MOTIVATION
Satisfaction
Intention to stay
Role Clarity
Security & Stress

GROUP
Teamwork
Coordination
Quality

ORGANIZATIONAL
Quality
Customer Service
External Adaptability

How Culture Works Model from Robert A. Cooke, Ph.D., and Janet L. Szumal, Ph.D., Organisational Effectiveness Inventory ™ (OCI/OEI) Feedback Report, Human Synergistics International, Plymouth MI. Copyright © 1987 - 2016. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

The research work of Dr Robert A. Cooke has led to the 'How Culture Works' Model:

As the model illustrates, understanding how culture works means looking at 4 separate but interrelated components:

1. Ideal or Preferred Culture

Most organisations have established a statement of 'core values'. These represent a set of desired behaviours – they describe the way senior executives want people to behave. These set the 'baseline' for behavioural expectations.

2. Causal Factors

These are the antecedents of culture – they 'come before' and determine what the culture will look like – how people believe they are expected to behave in order to fit in, get ahead and at time simply survive. Dr Cooke's research has identified these to be:

Articulation of Mission: Simply having a set of values is not enough. They must be real, they must be alive, they must be visible and they must be meaningful. How effectively these are articulated throughout the organisation influences the organisation's culture. Alongside this is the organisation's mission and/or vision statements. Why does the organisation exist, who is it there to serve and what is its role in the wider society? How these are expressed influence the organisation's culture.

For example: the organisation reflects its true preference through the ways they emphasise shareholders, customers and/or staff in their mission statements. If such statements are all oriented towards shareholder wealth, no matter how much management talks about customer service, people will believe that it's all about profitability. Perhaps the organisation has printed 'core values' everywhere for everyone to see, but when asked, top executives can't even remember what they are.

Structures: How the organisation's structure allows people to have influence, get involved, be empowered and contribute to how the organisation functions. Can people influence what goes in the organisation? Are their ideas listened to? Are their opinions asked? Is authority very centralised or decentralised? How much influence at various levels of the organisation do people have? All of these send a message regarding how people should behave.

For example: An organisation reaps the benefits of economic efficiencies from a highly centralised structure, but then expects people at lower levels to use their initiative and take accountability, when the structure actually reinforces the notion that they are not trusted to make decisions.

Systems: What messages do people take from what gets reinforced throughout the organisation? What gets rewarded? What gets punished?

Human Resource systems are powerful reinforcement mechanisms for giving people messages about what gets rewarded and what gets punished. Who gets promoted? How do people get promoted? How are opportunities made available? Do people receive the training they need to do their jobs and how does the organisation deal with diversity?

Appraisal and reinforcement systems – how the organisation monitors and reinforces performance sends a very powerful message regarding what is important. Are measures based on objective criteria? Is there a clear line of sight between effort and outcome? Are people being held accountable for performance outcomes they can actually influence? Can people rely on good performance being recognised and rewarded, or are mistakes emphasised and blame prevails?

Goal Setting systems – how the organisation goes about motivating people to achieve results also sends important messages – are goals clear and challenging? Are people involved in the process? Are goals fully accepted?

For example: a forced choice performance appraisal system reinforces the belief that performance is based more on comparisons than actual performance, resulting in minimal sharing of information and competition rather than co-operation.

Job design: How jobs are designed has enormous impact on the organisation's culture. The key question here is – how motivating is the job itself? Is the job designed and structured to allow people to realise their full potential or is it designed to maximise efficiency through standardisation, compartmentalisation and specialisation? How much autonomy, variety, identity and significance is built into the design of jobs? Are jobs designed in ways that allow the people performing them to see how well they are performing or do they need feedback from supervisors in order to know how well they are performing?

For example: Jobs are designed in ways that limit autonomy but then management is surprised when their requests for innovative thinking and performance accountability fall on deaf ears.

Communication and Leadership: How effectively an organisation communicates up and down the organisation impacts on culture. Downwards communication needs to be timely, complete, credible and consistent. Upwards communication needs to be forthright, uncensored, provided voluntarily and acted upon. The content of such communication is also important. It should be more than simply facts and figures. It should be to promote discussion and how to solve problems.

Leadership needs to show a balance of task and people orientation, with leaders facilitating work achievement and interpersonal connectedness. It is also about how much the leaders communicate expectations for excellence. How leaders lead and how managers manage is at the very heart of organisational culture. Do managers and leaders role model excellence, do they facilitate peoples' ability to achieve and do they work together to illustrate collective effort?

For example: Top management want to build a sense of 'one organisation', but downwards communication is all about how each division or business unit is performing, reinforcing the siloed business. Leaders and managers talk about the importance of culture, but their own behaviour doesn't genuinely role model the values and desired behaviours they espouse.

3. Actual operating culture

The behaviours that are reinforced by the Causal Factors referred to above. These become the behaviours that people believe they should use in order to fit in and get ahead. Such behaviours could be:

Constructive behaviours – expectations for organisational members to strive for excellence, to learn and grow, to support each other, build relationships and work collaboratively. Operating cultures with these expectations motivate people to perform at a high level, producing sustainable results over time.

Passive/Defensive behaviours – expectations for organisational members to be cautious, to push decision upwards, be tentative about ideas and ensure they please their managers. Operating cultures with these expectations motivate people to seek security by hiding behind rules and regulations and rigidly adhering to procedures, making the organisation vulnerable to change and unsustainable over time.

Aggressive/Defensive behaviours – expectations for organisational members to be forceful, critical, competitive (against each other) and to put work before anything else. Operating cultures with these expectations motivate people to seek short-term solutions that provide a 'quick fix' but create issues over the longer term. Whilst short-term performance may, under certain conditions, be strong, longer term performance is unsustainable.

4. Outcomes

Outcomes of culture occur at the individual, group and organisational levels. Individual level outcomes include such factors as employee engagement, motivation, role clarity and stress. Group level outcomes include teamwork and inter-unit coordination. Organisational level outcomes include quality, customer service, organisational adaptability, safety and many other industry specific outcomes such as shrink rate in the retail industry.

Examples of where changing Culture has led to improved performance

Improved performance indicators we have seen in Australia and New Zealand achieved as a result of building more Constructive cultures include improved:

Financial Services Organisations:	Risk management Customer service Revenue Cost to revenue control Employee engagement
Fast Moving Consumer Goods:	Revenue Profitability Employee engagement Staff retention and associated costs
Hospitality:	Operating cost management Staff retention and associated costs Brand reputation
Resources:	Safety Commercialisation of research projects Staff retention
Storage Services:	Customer satisfaction
Publishing:	Revenue Profitability Customer service Employee engagement
Water Utilities:	Efficiency Customer service Staff retention
Local Government:	Operating costs management Customer service Staff retention

Central Government:	Processing times Operating costs management Customer service
Retail:	Revenue Profitability Shrink rate Market share Staff retention
Telecommunications:	Customer satisfaction Customer base Revenue Employee engagement
Construction/Project Alliances:	Revenue Profitability Safety Project delivery Collaboration (between Alliance partners)
Professional Sports Clubs:	Stakeholder satisfaction Revenue On-field performance
IT Services:	Revenue Profitability Customer satisfaction
Professional Services:	Revenue Brand Customer service
Advertising:	Revenue Profitability Staff satisfaction

Culture management consulting expertise and tools to help you

Human Synergistics aim to make the intangible tangible. To take concepts such as organisational culture and make them visible, tangible and real. Our survey measurement and feedback tools are designed to help you:

Identify your ideal culture	Identify your current culture	Identify what causes your current culture	The impact your culture has on individuals, groups and your organisation
What behaviours will help your organisation achieve its goals and excel at what you do?	What behaviours are currently being reinforced and how do people believe they are expected to behave? Is it helping or hindering?	How effective are your current organisational practices and how do they impact your culture?	What impact is your current culture having on your organisations ability to achieve excellence.

A research based process of change management – scientifically proven steps in the change process – applying knowledge expertise and support for senior leadership and change agents

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