



Facilitator's Guide

Understanding Your Organization's Culture

The only thing of real importance that leaders do is to create and manage culture.—Edgar Schein

Rationale:

Effective leaders have a profound effect upon the culture of their organizations. Leaders hire and fire, determine policies and are organizational role models. All of these factors impact an organization's culture. Therefore, it is important that leaders understand the basics behind culture and how to influence it toward desired results.

Program Goal:

To develop a working knowledge of the role that culture plays and the effect it has within an organization.

Program Objectives:

- To define general and organizational culture
- To recognize different levels of culture within your organization
- To recognize the effects of a toxic culture on an organization and determine ways to make the organization's culture more positive

Pre-Program Preparation:

- Read and make copies of "Understanding Your Organization's Culture" (CLD2-1) fact sheet.
- Print (or import into a PowerPoint) the two or three pictures you will use for the Introductory Activity.
- Bring in tangible items to demonstrate the different "levels of culture" of your organization. (See Objective 2, Learning Activity 2 for a list of example.)
- Make copies of the *Is this Organization Toxic?* *handout*.
- Secure flip chart and markers.

Introduction:

There are a variety of features that give an organization meaning, make it familiar and recognizable. One of these features is culture. Culture gives meaning to nearly every aspect of life and is no less important within an organizational setting. Understanding culture in the general sense can lead to a working knowledge of organizational culture, which could mean stronger leaders, more community engagement and growth for your organization. But would you recognize culture if you saw it?

Introductory Activity:

NOTE: For this Introductory Activity, you need to find enough pictures (If leaving the group whole, I would locate 3-4 pictures. If you break up the group into smaller groups, you need to locate 1 picture per group) that illustrate the idea of culture. Ideas for pictures include: a Native American family sitting outside their tepee, an American (or other culture) family sitting down to dinner, doctors helping kids at a clinic, a family celebrating a holiday, birthday, etc. Any picture that demonstrates specific values (which give meaning) for the group. For example, with a picture of a family sitting around the dinner table, you can talk about the values of family time, caring about each other, nutrition, what they are eating, etc. and how these values/norms give meaning to the idea of a family dinner.

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Activity: Ask participants to look at selected pictures (if you have time, present these to the large group one at a time. If not, break into groups of four to five and give each group a picture). Ask the group(s) these questions:

- Who are the people in the picture?
- What do you think they value? Why?

Share: Individual and group values are part of culture. They help to give meaning to life. Move into Learning Activity 1.

Objective 1: Describe general and organizational culture

In general, **culture** is the shared beliefs and values that give meaning to life; those beliefs and values allow social groups to set norms and customs that shape everyday life.

Learning Activity 1:

For instance, the state of Kentucky is unlike any other state in the United States; there are shared beliefs and values which make our state unique and different.

- Have individuals pair up (groups of three are allowed) and come up with a list of five beliefs or values unique to Kentucky. Give the groups approximately three minutes; then have each group share one of their examples. Write these beliefs/values on a flip chart; go around to each group two or three times (as time permits). Once you have a good list on the flip chart, ask the overall group:
 - » How do these beliefs/values affect Kentucky's culture?

Similarly, organizations exhibit cultures of their own. **Organizational culture** is the set of shared values, goals and practices that give meaning to a group or organization. Some describe it as the personality of the organization.

- Maintain the same groups as above. Have individuals talk and come up with three values/practices that define their organization—what makes it unique. Once everyone has shared, discuss the following question:
 - » How do these values affect the culture of your Homemakers' group?

Bring the discussion to a close by discussing how different values/practices demonstrate the overall Homemakers' organizational culture. If some of the values or practices seem out of place with the overall Homemakers' mission, it is important to note there

may be a difference between promoted values and what is actually being demonstrated (the "talk" doesn't match the "walk"). Positive or negative, this can be a great introduction to a club visioning process.

Objective 2: Recognize different levels of culture within your organization

The culture of your organization has different levels:

- **Artifacts:** What individuals can see on the surface. These are aspects that people see, hear or feel when interacting with an organization. You can sense it from what employees wear, the way the furniture is arranged, how employees or volunteers behave towards one another, etc. Generally artifacts of an organization are easy to observe, but it may be difficult for an outsider to decipher what they truly mean.
- **Shared Values:** The significant values, morals or beliefs claimed to be especially important by leaders within the organization. All deeper levels of organizational culture begin as a shared value and eventually become shared assumptions (over time, after repetition). For example, values such as trust, honesty or integrity play a strong role within the moral structure of many organizations.
- **Basic Assumptions:** How situations or problems within the organization evolve with repetition. Rules, policies and procedures within an organization are based on shared assumptions that have developed within the organizational culture. A good example of shared assumptions within any group is the constitution or bylaws by which the group is governed.

Learning Activity 2:

It is important to have an understanding of how your organization's culture is demonstrated to others; it could mean the difference between a thriving organization that is attracting members and volunteers, and one that is struggling to survive.

As the facilitator, bring in a few tangible items from each level of culture. For example:

- **Artifacts:** Gavel, quilt, food
- **Shared Values:** Homemaker creed, vision
- **Basic Assumptions:** Homemaker constitution or bylaws

You may already have many of these tangible items at your office; others you may have to bring from home or ask veteran Homemakers to bring them to the meeting.

Let's take a closer look at the items brought to the meeting. Ask the individuals to identify the level of culture each artifact belongs to. To do this, hold up each artifact singly to the audience and have them write down the appropriate cultural level. When finished, either write down or orally explain the correct answers.

Debrief with a discussion:

- How do these artifacts demonstrate our organizational culture?
- Are all of the artifacts illustrative of our current culture? Should some be considered historical artifacts?
- Are there objects that aren't here (things we would like to be a part of illustrating our organizational culture)? How could we incorporate those into our culture?

Objective 3: Recognize the effects of a toxic culture on an organization and determine ways to make the organization's culture more positive

To introduce your audience to Learning Activity 3, have them "read" your organization's culture to determine if it is positive or toxic. (Both you and your group members should read the culture of your organization so that you get a good picture of how all group members see the overall group.) Some easy (but fun) ways to read your group's culture are:

- List six adjectives to describe your organization.
- Think of a song that depicts your culture.
- Create a metaphor..."If my organization were an animal, it would be a _____, because _____."
- Compile an organizational history.
- Interview an organization's storyteller.

Give group members time to "read" your organization's culture. Once everyone is finished, have group members share their "read" on your organizational culture. Consider the effects of the health of your organization. (**Notes:** It's a good idea to have someone recording general thoughts/ideas so you can capture the overall feelings of the group. As previously mentioned, this activity is a fabulous introduction into a visioning process. It is also a great introduction to Learning Activity 3. However, don't feel pressured to move into Learning Activity 3; the "read" activity can stand alone.)

Learning Activity 3:

However it is illustrated, it will be fairly obvious if the culture of your group is positive or negative ("toxic"). Unfortunately, some groups experience a "toxic culture"—a culture that is lethal to the well-being of its members as well as to the overall success of the organization. Write the signs of a toxic culture on the flip chart:

- Rampant gossip and/or rumors
- Us vs. them mentality
- Retaining poor talent
- Double standards for leadership (accountability, rewards)
- Inconsistency
- Ethical issues

Distribute the *Is This Organization Toxic? handout*. Give individuals five minutes to choose which organization is toxic and complete the worksheet.

Once individuals have finished, take time to review the worksheet. On a flip chart (or whiteboard) list the issues individuals have come up with; next to the issues, list the suggestions they have for improvement. Talk about the appropriateness of their suggestions, and ask them for their own personal examples, and discuss appropriate suggestions for improvement.

Summary:

Organizational culture is an important aspect that is often overlooked or misunderstood by leaders. Having a strong organizational culture can mean stability for an organization; it gives the organization permanency and encourages it to look into the future. An effective leader will learn the basics of organizational culture, be able to recognize a toxic culture and understand how to influence their organization toward a successful future.

References:

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Is This Organization Toxic?

Directions: Read the following scenarios. Determine which organization has a toxic culture, and answer the questions below:

Organization A: *Ellen has been the leader of Organization A for 3 years. Over those three years, she credits her empowerment strategies as part of the reason that volunteer recruitment is up, and more individuals are stepping into leadership roles. A primary goal Ellen has is to establish a culture within her organization that values every individual, encourages personal development, and ultimately contributes something to the community. Even though it is time for Ellen to step down, she feels the culture of the organization is making active progress toward these goals, and is a great organization to be a part of.*

Organization B: *Jane has been a member of Organization B for 20 years, and up until recently, has loved every minute. In the beginning, the culture of the organization was welcoming; it valued family, and encouraged involvement in the community. However, recently a new leader (Jennifer) has taken over the organization, and things have changed. Jennifer's primary mission is to make the club more exclusive, and with that has come some unhealthy side effects. Gossip and rumors are now regular occurrences (both inside and outside of meetings), items have turned up missing, and Jennifer has begun to play "favorites" with certain club members and doesn't require them to follow organizational rules and procedures. All of this has many group members very unhappy, and as a direct result, volunteer membership is down 50% and no one is stepping forward to take on leadership roles. Overall, the organization's culture is suffering, but no one knows what to do.*

Which organization has a toxic culture? _____

Major Issues: _____

Suggestions for Improvement (How can the issues listed above be addressed?): _____
