

Chapter 87

Knowledge Culture

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ABSTRACT

Every organization exhibits a culture made up of the beliefs and norms guiding the day to day behavior of the individuals in it. Culture may or may not be in alignment with senior management's official pronouncements, formal operational rules, or the public image an organization's leaders wish to project. Culture may support or undermine discipline in managing and sharing knowledge. This chapter explores how certain key characteristics are common for organizations in which knowledge management is a priority underpinned by funding and by senior management rewards for behaviors supporting the use of knowledge toward overall organizational benefit.

BACKGROUND: WHAT IS MEANT BY CULTURE?

Every organization contains, and operates according to, a *culture* arising from multiple characteristics ranging from individual employee personalities through team dynamics to deliberate policies on the part of management and leaders' emphasis on desired behaviors. Organizational culture is a product of "what goes" in day to day operations - in other words, of what is considered normal, desirable, or untoward (effective cultures root out poor behaviors because of the common opprobrium). Most individuals seek to be respected and admired in their workplaces and will gravitate to behaviors appearing to produce such respect and admiration; in addition they intuit what behaviors will get them ahead and thus put effort into such behaviors. Similarly, individuals learn quickly what behaviors will not produce desirable results. Culture, therefore, is an ecosystem of balances between self interest, team spirit, and tradeoffs between the ideal and the possible as individuals navigate rules, beliefs, behavior and communication styles, and their own aspirations.

Certain types of cultures are more common in specific environments. For example, small nonprofits tend to operate according to standards different from those seen in large companies. Banks and insurance companies are inherently different from charities just as hospitals are different from software firms in terms of normal and expected behavior patterns, interpersonal communication practices, and the degree of latitude given to employees in decision making.

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In its essence, corporate culture is the sum total of the answers potentially given to the question “what is it like to work here?” A strongly positive culture will get responses in the vein of “I just love working here - we have a great team, we all look out for each other, and our efforts are noticed and rewarded by managers who always seek to support our career advancement.” A negative culture would produce sentiments to reflect disappointment, apathy, and lack of loyalty. (Unfortunately, national economic crises and personal financial struggles skew what would otherwise be a natural tendency to leave pain-inducing workplaces and seek out positive ones.)

A similar measure of organizational culture is the extent to which employees stand behind - and are given the means and tools to put into practice - official mission and vision statements. It is not uncommon to find employees’ experience of reality at quite a contrast with the framed statements on the wall and the banners on the Website.

The expression “toxic workplaces” could refer to hazardous waste disposal sites, but it most often describes environments where envy, resentment, and hostility create unproductive behaviors and much stress on the part of employees. In settings where managers and leaders - possibly through simple lack of interest in or awareness of what goes on in the management layers below them - allow untoward behaviors to persist, it is not surprising to find high turnover and low productivity. Conversely, in environments where managers and leaders take an active interest in rewarding positive behavior, it is common to find outstanding collaboration, mutual support, team cohesion, and an unusually high degree of ‘going the extra mile’.

Organizational culture is evident in the well-known phenomenon of “the new owner” or “the new-broom manager.” Change may be a welcome correction to an untenable situation - or a catastrophic destruction of a well functioning unit. New management may sensitively diagnose the existing culture of a team, department, or organization and then move to make suitable adjustments - reallocating work assignments, introducing new tools or procedures, and in other ways demonstrating understanding of the value of employees’ knowledge and expertise. Conversely, new management may impose its own preferred practices without regard to what worked well in the past, thus demonstrating disregard for employees, invalidating their sense of pride in work, and in other ways losing staff members’ trust.

The entire profession of human resources management pays attention to what motivates employees and to strategies for deriving maximum business value from their talents. The vast volume of literature on organizational leadership bears witness to the understanding that culture is a powerful tool for performance - or a significant hindrance. Dalkir (2011) devotes a chapter (“The Role of Organizational Culture”) to discussing the symptoms of common types of cultures, to outlining the role of norms in the likelihood of successful change, and to summarizing models of culture (ranging from unordered to organized and nimble). In the chapter, she provides useful examples how the maturity of an organization’s methods for orchestrating overall activity is reflected in the sophistication of its knowledge management processes and tools.

How *do* corporate goals and values translate into day to day practices in knowledge management? This chapter focuses on aspects of organizational culture specifically associated with organizational and departmental leadership regarding knowledge and on leaders’ individual approaches to knowledge.

Official Values vs. Day to Day Knowledge Behavior

Truisms describing employees as an organization’s most significant assets illustrate the pervasive common acceptance that knowledge is a good thing and should be sought out, nurtured, and rewarded. It

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