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Taking the mystery out of culture

Regardless of the type of work your organization performs, there are three generic ingredients required for success:

- Quality tools and processes.
- A knowledgeable and skilled workforce.
- A healthy mindset throughout the organization.

Whether your organization builds homes or educates students, is public or private, employs one or hundreds, neglecting just one of these key elements is potentially lethal.

Let's take the example of a restaurant. What's required to coax patrons back time and time again when so many choices are available to them?

- The right cooking equipment, quality ingredients, and great recipes.
- Chefs and wait staff competent in consistently turning orders into delicious meals.
- Staff that always portray they thoroughly enjoy taking care of customers.

The third ingredient, often referred to as the culture of the organization, is the most difficult to assess and perfect. Culture can be defined as the shared, learned and implied values, beliefs and attitudes that shape and influence a group's perceptions and behaviors. Think of culture as the collective emotional environment of the organization.



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They incorrectly conclude that the business gods indiscriminately bestow great cultures on a few chosen organizations, just as a few individuals are blessed with high intelligence, great public speaking skills and other desirable attributes.

But wait! We now know that with focused attention, time and, in some cases, a little money, individuals can acquire many of the personal traits that prior generations thought of as intrinsic. The same goes for an organization's culture, although both defining and influencing the attributes of a group are much more difficult, because complexity increases with each additional person.

Assessing and positively affecting the culture of an organization is the unique responsibility of leadership.

It starts by gleaning brutally honest observations from a cross-section of individuals who see your business

Unfortunately, many leaders mistakenly dismiss culture as irrelevant or consider it something shrouded in mystery and beyond their ability to affect, akin to an adolescent's mood swings.

from differing viewpoints (employees, customers, and vendors) to identify the current norms of the organization. How do we really behave? What do our actions reveal about what's really important to us, regardless of what's posted on the walls?

Once the true culture is understood, an inventory of strengths and weaknesses is created. The gap between the current reality and the future goal is defined, with potentially lethal flaws targeted.

Once again, the work of changing cultural weaknesses into strengths falls distinctly on leadership, beginning at the very top. Long-lasting, successful change depends more on how leaders are observed to behave rather than anything they say or write. In short, it's imperative that leaders model the very behaviors they desire from employees in the new culture.

Let's say an organization determines its members hoard valuable information in an effort to increase their perceived importance and job security. Leaders might define their specific actions as follows:

- Increase transparency by sharing pertinent business information each quarter in all-employee talks delivered as a leadership team.
- Start evaluating employees for

teamwork when making promotions and annual evaluations.

- Avoid hiring "lone rangers" regardless of their work experience and skills.
- Boost recognition of team accomplishments and de-emphasize individual deeds.
- Implement a formal mentoring program.
- Ensure that managers are visibly working on projects together.

It's often helpful when identifying these leadership actions to think in terms of what do we need to start doing? Stop doing? Do more of? Do less of?

Modifying an organization's culture is a slow, tedious process, to be sure. Positive change will only occur after months of effort. Rest assured, however, that real change is indeed possible and worth the time. Unlike the first two ingredients listed above, a first-class culture is an almost invisible competitive advantage.

Rick Brimeyer is the president of Brimeyer LLC, an independent management consulting firm located in Ames that guides organizations to higher performance by focusing on process improvement and leadership development.

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