

Best Practice Case Study: Building a Constructive Culture at The Word Among Us



The Word Among Us Facts

Industry
Publishing (Niche/Religious)

Diagnostic Tool
Organizational Culture Inventory® (OCI®)

Total Staff
60

Subscribers:
500,000 Worldwide

“What I like about the OCI is that it’s measurable. I went to our board of directors and said, ‘These are the areas where we’re weak, and we can improve these.’ And even when you improve, the OCI continues to show areas for improvement. We’ve got plenty of room to grow.”

Jeff Smith
CEO, The Word Among Us

The Challenge

Catholic publishing company The Word Among Us (WAU) provides more than 500,000 readers throughout the world with daily meditations, devotionals, books, and other resources that encourage Catholics to connect more deeply with their faith and act in ways that mirror the values of the church. The organization itself, however, realized it was not reaching its full potential and, in some ways, the management and staff at WAU weren’t living and breathing the organization’s own mission and values.

The Word Among Us derived its name from scripture, and with it came a lofty goal: “To be an instrument of the Spirit whose desire is to manifest Jesus’ presence in and to the people of God.” While the organization had a rather positive culture in place that prompted employees to recommend it as a great place to work, the company’s CEO, Jeff Smith, recognized that there was plenty of room for improvement. Working collaboratively with Jim Berlucchi, CEO of the Spitzer Center, Smith set out to define the ways in which he could ensure The Word Among Us fulfilled its mission.

Catholic organizations.” The Four Levels of Happiness model is built on the premise that happiness is the one thing that we desire in and for itself. It ultimately drives all of our behavior. The model encompasses all stages of happiness in a hierarchy of four, from instant gratification (Level One), to ego gratification that is largely comparative (Level Two), to doing good for others that is contributive (Level Three), to transcendence (Level Four).

CONNECTING CULTURE CHANGE AND HAPPINESS

In early 2010, Smith and Berlucchi began working together to increase the effectiveness of leaders, including Smith, at WAU. Berlucchi and the Spitzer Center use a model called the Four Levels of Happiness® (Figure 1) to achieve their mission of “strengthen[ing] culture, faith and spirit in

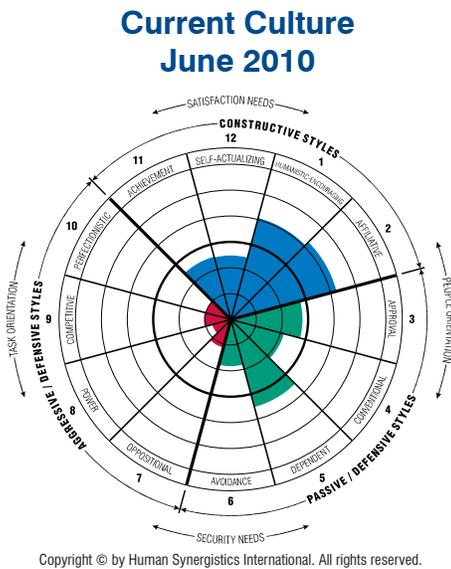
Figure 1: The Four Levels of Happiness® Model



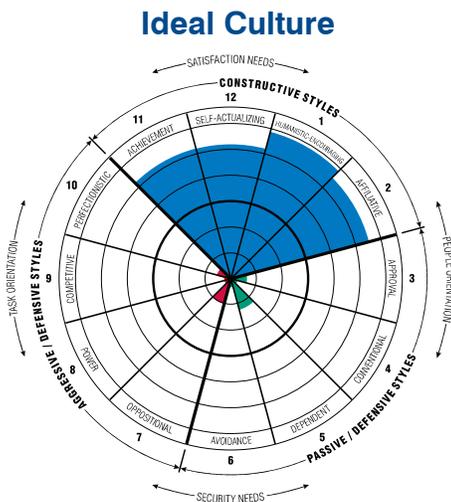
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Figure 2: WAU Culture Profiles



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In order for an organization to be successful, its members should ideally find satisfaction and happiness in their roles, particularly at Level Two (personal achievement) and Level Three (the common good). According to the Spitzer Center, a healthy Level 2 and strong Level 3 culture results in “heightened sense of commitment to the corporate mission, values and goals; improved employee morale and retention; greater trust and ethical conduct among employees; and increased teamwork, creativity, productivity and organizational performance.”

As Berlucchi taught the Spitzer Center curriculum to the members of WAU, he turned to the tool that the center primarily relies on for assessment, Human Synergistics’ *Organizational Culture Inventory® (OCI®)*, to help WAU define goals for a culture change initiative.

“Jeff [Smith] is the kind of person who always wants to keep improving his company,” said Berlucchi. “They’ve got a good culture [at WAU] and he wanted to continue to increase the effectiveness of the company.”

The OCI, developed by Drs. Robert A. Cooke and J. Clayton Lafferty of Human Synergistics International, is recognized as the most widely-used and thoroughly-researched organizational culture survey in the world. Based on a circular graph called the Circumplex, the OCI provides a “point-in-time” picture of an organization’s operating culture in terms of the behaviors that members believe are expected or implicitly required.

The OCI and the Circumplex tie in well with the Four Levels of Happiness. The Constructive styles of Achievement and Self-Actualizing reflect a healthy expression of Level Two ego gratification. Humanistic-Encouraging and Affiliative link directly with Level Three happiness of contributing to the common good. Combining the OCI with the Four Levels of Happiness model provided a unique opportunity to connect culture change with WAU’s religious values.

“Jim Berlucchi had worked for us as a consultant on an earlier project, and he told me about the OCI and suggested that I take it,” said Smith. “I started to get a little bit of understanding of the OCI, and then I had my managers do the Actual [OCI Current] and Ideal [OCI Ideal], and four or five months later I felt we could improve as a company using this tool.”

DEFINING THE NEED FOR CHANGE

When Smith began the culture change process, he did not have any specific goals in place; he simply wanted to determine if the process would benefit WAU. In June 2010, he expanded the program to the entire company in a day-long debrief on the OCI and the Four Levels, asking all employees to complete the OCI Current. For Smith, who has been WAU’s CEO since 1995, the process was eye-opening.

“I wanted to see how we were truly doing as a company, and I really wanted to see how our employees in the trenches evaluated us,” he said. “I had a philosophy that we wanted to be entrepreneurial and move quickly, and therefore, at times, I would implement changes and new programs that would cause problems in the trenches because we didn’t think through the implications.”

The disconnect between the Current and Ideal Cultures as presented in Figure 2 showed significant gaps in the Constructive styles of Self-Actualizing and Achievement, with other notable discrepancies in the Passive/Defensive styles of Dependent and Approval.

Constructive Cultures promote the fulfillment of higher-order needs and are linked to performance, growth, and work quality. Constructive norms promote self-enhancing thinking and behavior that contribute to one’s satisfaction levels, ability to develop productive relationships and work effectively with people, and

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proficiency at accomplishing tasks. Research has also shown Constructive Cultures to be correlated with organizational effectiveness and profitability. Passive/Defensive cultural norms, on the other hand, interfere with personal effectiveness and negatively impact individual health and well-being.

“We started to see some weaknesses—for example, we don’t invite staff members to challenge those of us in management roles, and this creates a Dependent culture,” said Smith. “People love working here—we’re high on Humanistic-Encouraging, and they all recommend us as a great place to work to their friends—but we need to value our employees’ viewpoints, and I especially need to value people’s input better than I used to. I think that today, after more than a year of working on these issues, our staff would agree that the company is growing in welcoming comments from any and all levels to improve the company so that not all new ideas and initiatives are originating from the top.”

MOVING CULTURE IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

Organizations often begin change initiatives with an incomplete or abstract understanding of the problem, realizing that there is something wrong but not being able to define what that something is. Unlike many organizational culture assessments, the OCI provides organizations with concrete information about behaviors that should be increased or mitigated to enhance the effectiveness of the organization.

“We identified 10 behaviors to improve,” said Smith. “We attacked the OCI results by going after the behaviors, because I can do something about specific behaviors.”

Smith chose the top five behaviors to increase and the top five behaviors to decrease as a starting point for

organizational change. Focusing on the OCI survey items, the five behaviors Smith chose to increase all fall within the Constructive cluster, and include: “help others think for themselves”; “involve others in decisions affecting them”; “be concerned about their own growth”; “think ahead and plan”; and “resolve conflicts constructively.” All of these behaviors reflect healthy Level Two happiness.

Conversely, the top five behaviors WAU chose to decrease are in the Passive/Defensive cluster and include: “never challenge superiors”; “do things for the approval of others”; “follow orders...even when they’re wrong”; “accept goals without questioning them”; and “not rock the boat.” Three of these five behaviors are associated with the Dependent style, one of the main focuses of WAU’s change program. Berlucchi views these behaviors as being on the undesirable side of Level Two happiness.

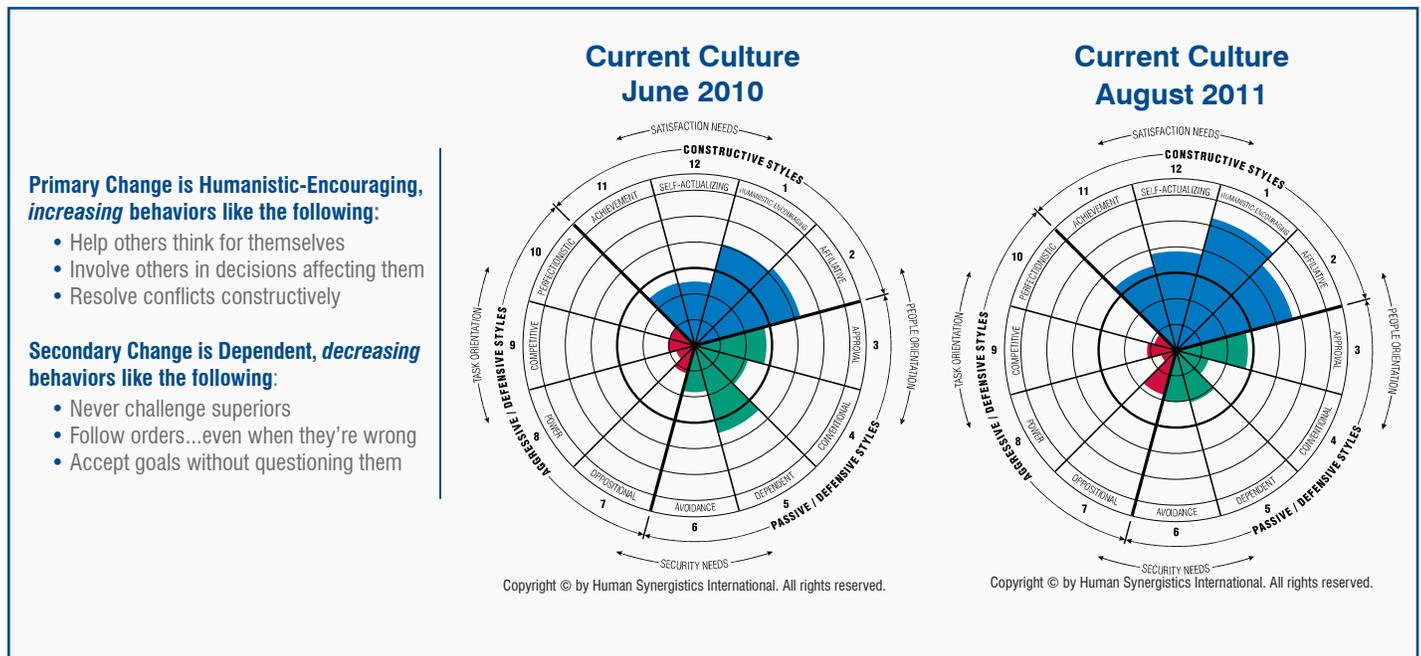
Smith also began changing his own behavior, particularly after learning that employees at WAU felt he wasn’t open enough to other people’s feedback. He worked collaboratively with the managers and staff at WAU to begin moving himself and the culture in the right direction.

“We broke the whole staff down into little reengineering teams and gave them specific tasks to improve,” Smith said. “Each group would give me their suggestions, and we implemented a whole bunch of minor changes that added up.”

These changes included taking part in cross-training to enable employees to understand how their and others’ roles contributed to the success of the organization as a whole, reemphasizing the OCI-driven change initiative at every managers’ meeting, and rewarding employees.

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Figure 3: WAU Culture Profiles—June 2010 Compared with August 2011



WIDESPREAD CHANGES

The many incremental changes put into place at WAU added up to significant results on the culture front in just over a year (Figure 3). They saw measurable improvement in nine of the ten targeted behaviors, with norms for the Constructive behaviors increasing by as much as 75 percent and some of the Passive/Defensive behaviors decreasing by more than half.

“I want to personally grow and I want the company to grow to be more Achievement-oriented,” said Smith. “Some Christians could say Self-Actualization isn’t a Christian thing, but I believe that we’re all called to develop ourselves to the greatest extent. Some on staff have no religious beliefs and others have a lot, but everybody wants to be treated with respect and to be heard.”

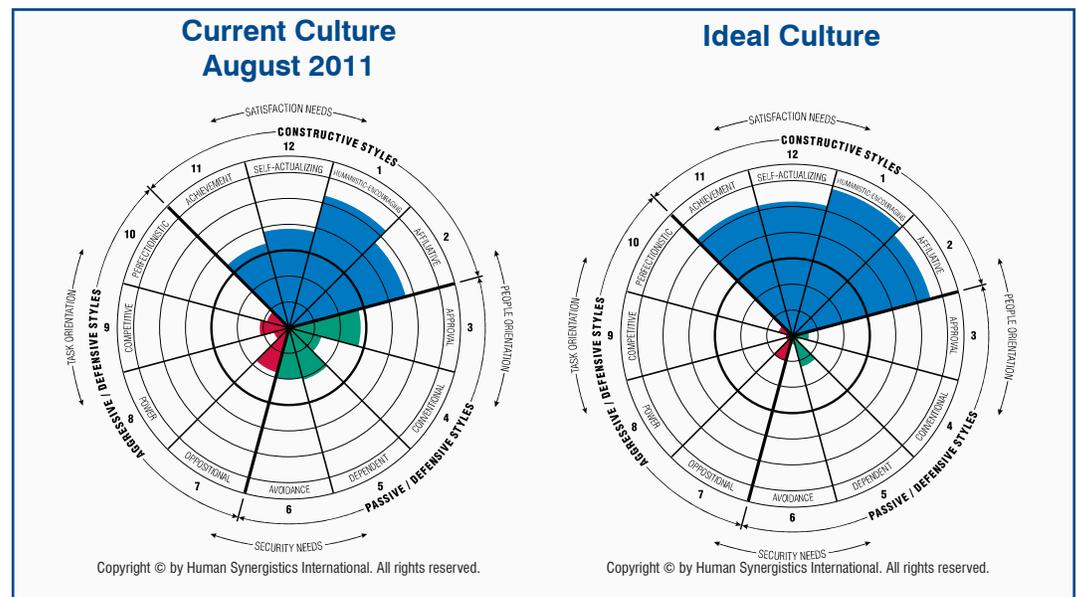
Smith has strived to make sure that every employee got just that—respect and the chance to make his or her voice heard. He has taken the time to sit down with managers and employees to find out more about the challenges they face and brainstorm ideas for increasing efficiency.

“One of our major improvements was in our data entry department. I wasn’t giving them enough resources to get their jobs done in a timely manner. Therefore, it was sometimes taking several weeks for a piece of mail to be entered into our system,” Smith said. “Before that, I wasn’t fully aware of the problem. So, I started sitting down with the data entry manager every couple of weeks, and she has turned her department from feeling stressed to really feeling like a winner. Today, everyone in the company knows that our data entry department is fast and efficient, and this, of course, makes us a stronger servant for our customers.”

The changes at WAU have been widespread, infiltrating nearly every department and level of the organization. In August of 2011, employees at WAU were asked to complete an evaluation after the Four Levels of Happiness and the OCI were presented and debriefed by Berlucchi, and the feedback was quite positive. Multiple comments were submitted stating that the process brought the company together and showed that the leadership team really cares. Smith has noticed a marked difference in his own leadership style as well.

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Figure 4: WAU Culture Profiles



“The OCI has helped me improve,” he said. “It’s easy to say I know how to run this business and not seek to improve, and the OCI has challenged me to change and become a different kind of manager who welcomes comments from others.”

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

From June 2010 to August 2011, WAU’s culture shifted significantly away from the Passive/Defensive styles and toward the Constructive styles and the Ideal Culture. The changes are reflected not only in the Circumplex profiles (Figure 4), but also in the company’s operating style and bottom line. Smith has seen the change and its effects firsthand, and has high hopes for the company’s continued improvement.

“You don’t change everything in one year. We still have the same tendencies, but our scores have improved a lot,” he said. “We’ll do both [the OCI Current and the OCI Ideal] next year, and I think our Ideal is going to be a little different, because we’ll value conflict more than we used to. We will value Oppositional behavior a little bit more.”

WAU is changing for the better already, becoming a more efficient, Constructive organization.

“We’re becoming a much more intelligent company, thinking better, communicating better, planning better, and making fewer mistakes as a result,” said Smith. “Our departments are integrated better, we’re being less niche-oriented, and we’re moving more toward working for the same goal: to improve the company.” The Ideal profile provides a language for the common goal, as well as a way to visually gauge progress over time.

In fact, Smith has seen so much positive change as a result of WAU’s work with the Spitzer Center and the OCI that he has begun encouraging others to embark on the same journey.

“I was in a meeting recently of 15 Catholic publishers, and I told them all about the OCI and about working with Berlucchi and the Spitzer Center,” he said. “I told them they should all do it. Most people think they’re too busy to do this kind of stuff, but I think we need to do it to be good, competent CEOs. This is the way that’s worked for us.”

The Spitzer Center helps Catholic organizations identify and work toward their Ideal Culture. For more information about the Spitzer Center, visit <http://www.spitzercenter.org/>. To learn more about The Word Among Us, go to <http://wau.org>.

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About the Circumplex

Human Synergistics International's Circumplex provides a way to "see" what drives the performance of individual contributors, leaders, work teams and, in short, the entire organization. It illustrates the factors underlying performance in terms of 12 styles of thinking and behaving. Some styles lead to effectiveness and productivity; some do not. Regardless of their impact, they all describe what's happening inside the organization and provide a direction for change and development.

Effective individuals in groups and organizations show **STRONGER** tendencies along the **Constructive styles**.

12

Members are expected to gain enjoyment from their work and produce high-quality products/services

1

Members are expected to be supportive, constructive, and open to influence in their dealings with each other

11

Members are expected to set challenging but realistic goals and solve problems effectively

2

Members are expected to be friendly, open, and sensitive to the satisfaction of the work group

10

Members are expected to avoid making mistakes, work long hours, and keep "on top" of everything

3

Members are expected to agree with, gain the approval of, and be liked by others

9

Members are expected to operate in a "win-lose" framework and work against their peers to be noticed

4

Members are expected to conform, follow the rules, and make a good impression

8

Members are expected to take charge and "control" others, and make decisions automatically

5

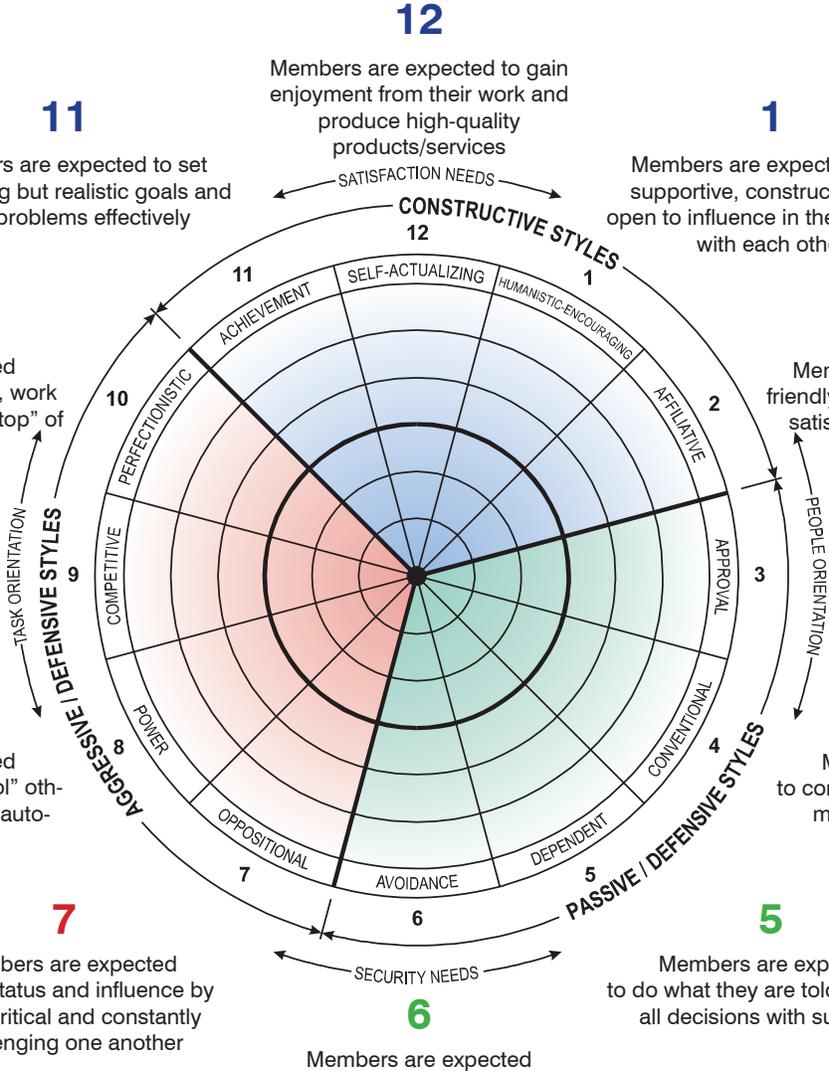
Members are expected to do what they are told and clear all decisions with superiors

7

Members are expected to gain status and influence by being critical and constantly challenging one another

6

Members are expected to shift responsibilities to others and avoid being blamed for mistakes



Effective individuals in groups and organizations show **WEAKER** tendencies along the **Aggressive/Defensive styles**.

Effective individuals in groups and organizations show **WEAKER** tendencies along the **Passive/Defensive styles**.

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Creators of the *Organizational Culture Inventory*®, *Desert Survival Situation*™, *Life Styles Inventory*™ and *Leadership/Impact*®.

HSI v. 1.0
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