

Culture Cascade Across Hierarchy



To measure, define and ultimately change the culture of an organization is most often a project of large scope. When you then find that you don't have one culture to deal with, but various, things are further complicated. There are two things that you want to steer clear off when it comes to your culture. The first is Defensive norms in the business because these will have a negative impact on the performance of employees and in the end of the whole organization. The other thing that you don't want is subcultures that are inherently different to one another which can lead to "siloeing" and other problems in the organization.

Let's back up one step. How is an organizational culture created, shaped and how does it drive the well-being of its members and the performance of its teams and organizational effectiveness on the whole? Human Synergistics' How Culture Works model provides you with insights on just that – how culture works. It will show you the path from your current culture to the ideal culture and finally helps you reach the outcomes you desire. It will also indicate climate factors which function as levers for change. These levers can help an organization to close the gap between the current and the ideal culture and thereby, to achieve those desired outcomes.

Climate and Culture Disconnect

An organization's climate encompasses the channels of communication that the organization extends towards their employees with regards to what is genuinely expected of them. This includes communication of goals and which behaviors are viewed as positive. These desired behaviors need to be represented in the mission and philosophy; such as, "we are a creative, adaptable place for our people to bring in their innovative ideas to the table." On our ideal culture profile this will show in a greater extension of the Self-Actualizing style. The catch, however, is that it is not enough to tell people to be creative and innovative – the structures of the organization need to be geared towards facilitating these behaviors. We need to communicate via the structures in our company that we want our people to try new things in their jobs and roles. We also need to design systems that recognize and reward creativity in a positive and systematic way as we want to reinforce this behavior. Leadership is another crucial climate factor as the role-modelling function of leaders for the behaviors that we want is so impactful. Employees should see leaders thinking in creative ways and trying new things, for example. Behaviors that are encouraged in an organization will show up in the current culture as a result of the positive and consistent communication of these behaviors through the design and leadership of the organization. When we can approach our work in unique and creative ways we also become more effective as this allows us to consider alternatives, weigh consequences against opportunities and to learn from mistakes.

So what happens when the values we express showing in our ideal profile and what is actually expected is expected in the organization are mismatched? What if we tell our people to be innovative, but we see leaders who play it safe with ideas or who strongly rely on tried and true methods? Or if new ideas are met with deaf ears instead of being rewarded or explored? Or if jobs are designed in a way that will only allow members to work on a small piece of the puzzle without seeing interconnections? We will probably end up with a Defensive culture as people don't know how to act – the message explicitly voiced is not the one implicitly transported. We call this a culture disconnect – and not only the current culture of this organization will be less Constructive, but employees will be less engaged, less motivated and less satisfied, leading to an organization that does not perform as well as it could.

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Changing Your Company's Culture – or Cultures?

Sometimes Defensive operating norms can lead to the formation of subcultures within an organization. This can happen along the lines of the location or function in which people work, but also along hierarchical levels which may impact the amount in which Constructive styles are shown and the results that these styles bring. In our OCI® survey we ask which hierarchical level a person belongs to as one of our standard demographic questions and this is what we have found: On the higher hierarchical levels Constructive styles that are psychologically healthy are highly valued and strived for in the OCI® Ideal and the desire for Blue Constructive styles in the ideal is quite consistent across all hierarchical levels. Real differences start to show in the climate factors, which tend to be more facilitating on the higher hierarchical levels while becoming more inhibiting on the lower hierarchical levels. This means in practice that the leadership level is clearer and more consistent about communicating goals, what is expected in the company as well as recognizing and rewarding the desired behaviors. On lower hierarchical levels the goals may be the same, but the communication may be rather negative emphasizing which mistakes you should not make and what is not your job which in turn is inconsistent with creating Constructive norms and behaviors. As we have seen above, the differences in these factors will also lead to differences in the current culture profiles. On the top levels of the organization we see Constructive current culture profiles but as we move down the hierarchical ranks, and we observe more inhibiting than facilitating climate factors, we see increasingly more Defensive profiles. But it does not stop there – while on higher hierarchical levels we see performance and well-being results being achieved, working in more Defensive cultures will let you miss your marks.

Subcultures in an organization mainly lead to three challenges. The first challenge we face is that collaborative and cohesive cooperation in an organization are oftentimes prevented. Another challenge is that performance and well-being across the organization will also become inconsistent. What we find is that higher levels are often not only more Constructive but also show more Aggressive/Defensive behavioral norms. The trouble is that Aggressive/Defensive behaviors can lead to increasingly Passive/Defensive norms on the lower levels of the organization. These differences therefore make it very difficult to work together on eye-level. The third challenge is that subcultures which are different from our values create an inconsistency in the collaboration that becomes difficult to deal with. This might mean that in some parts of the business or in some hierarchical interactions you will be expected to be creative and to be your unique self, but not in others. There will also be performance differences across hierarchical levels which makes it difficult to make improvements to the culture with singular interventions.

Generally, we observe that subcultures are less of a problem in more Constructive cultures as behaviors are more consistent. But there is a tendency that in more Defensive cultures people tend to adapt their behaviors more to certain situations or groups.

Want to learn more? Please feel free to reach out to us on info@humansynergistics.de.

To view the full webinar on the topic please click [here](#).