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Culture As Change Agent

Getting real about culture is the first step to getting change right.

By Megan Work

Today's Environment

How much does culture matter when your organization embarks on a large-scale change?

Change theories discuss the value of culture at length, but they often skip the practical steps to incorporating it into a change management plan. And while some aspects of culture are easy to identify—language, dress codes, value statements, how people treat each other— every organization has cultural norms that are more elusive, such as trust in leadership and how people deal with conflict. Getting these unspoken cultural drivers out on the table can be tough especially when budgets and schedules are tight. (There's a reason why they're unspoken, right?) It's easy to downplay or dismiss cultural influences on change, even though they have the power to derail a major initiative.

Point B's Perspective

Experience tells us that paying attention to culture plays a crucial role in determining how successful a major change effort will be.

Culture is seldom a neutral factor in change management. It's either a drag on change or an accelerant that gives meaning and momentum to change. Knowing how to effectively apply your organization's cultural traits will help everyone achieve the desired outcome.

Use culture as a lens in your change efforts.

Culture is the personality of your organization—the written and unwritten rules, behaviors and norms that make it unique. And as we all know, different personalities handle change differently.

Consider how your organization's personality will respond to major change. How do people treat each other? How are decisions made and communicated? Is the business pace slow and measured or fast and urgent? Do people handle conflict out in the open, or behind closed doors? How does culture influence the way your organization makes decisions, runs meetings and structures office space?

The most important cultural considerations may be the ones that nobody talks about. For example, corporate values may state that "we treat each other with respect," but perhaps respect is not the cultural norm during a heated meeting. Don't let an unspoken cultural norm undermine your change efforts.

Gaining this clarity will help prioritize which cultural traits to consider in your change plan. Tailoring communications to your organization's culture helps ensure that people will understand and absorb change.

During this process, engage your cultural sages— respected people with tenure in the organization that can speak to its history. They can tell you when and

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how the organization has struggled with change in the past. They can give you valuable input on effective messages. And they can help your change effort avoid any hidden cultural landmines.

Bring culture into your change management plan.

In order to use culture as a filter, you need to know your audience. How have people responded to change in the past? How do they process information? What role does leadership play, and when? Understanding your audience lets you apply cultural considerations as you develop messages and methods of communication.

Be sure to plan for the less tangible aspects of culture. They're often the driving force. For example, how does leadership feel about the scope and pace of change? Is there widespread fear across the organization? Will people openly express their concerns about a change, or will they silently resist it?

Start a dialogue. Look at ways to encourage feedback, build trust and incorporate the insights you gain. Keep assessing where teams and people are in their change journeys. For example, one of our clients wanted to standardize and automate their processes, giving more authority to the front lines and removing approval levels from managers, but the culture was very control-oriented. Point B's change management plan included developmental training that helped management relinquish control and helped staff learn comfort with their new autonomy.

Continue the conversation. In the case of change, silence is not golden. And no news is not good news.

Pay attention to strengths and weaknesses.

Even when a change is viewed as positive, it can come with feelings of loss and doubt. A cultural transformation plan can be a valuable way to build employees' trust in a new process or partnership. It's not always easy to let go of old baggage. Knowing your culture can help you

create new stories that give people a clear picture of how things are changing—and why.

Whenever possible, play to your organization's cultural strengths. Change managers often plan for an organization's weaknesses but forget to leverage the power of its positive assets.

However, it's important to remember that a cultural strength in one situation can be a weakness in another. For example, one of our clients had a strong familial culture that made it tough to have the candid conversations required to streamline its global operational processes and move the right people into the right positions. A change management plan enabled leaders to identify the problem and discuss solutions in a safe environment.

Rapid growth can transform a cultural strength into a vulnerability. One of our clients was used to informally communicating changes by word of mouth. As the company grew and multiple leaders shared disparate, sometime conflicting messages, its informal communication style began to create confusion. By adjusting to the reality of being a larger organization with diverse leadership styles, the company regained the clarity and control of its communications.

The Bottom Line

Culture is the defining character of your organization. Employ it to your advantage during times of change. Know your audience and use culture as a filter to shape messages, communication media, and training. Keep the conversation going, even if—especially if—you're not hearing what you'd like to hear. Enlist the help of cultural sages and other respected change agents who know the culture. Use your strengths. Address your weaknesses. Getting real about culture is the first step to getting change right.

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