

Tending to your Organization's Culture –
Five questions for executives
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With the many distractions that the current economy imposes, leaders and managers are largely in a reactive mode, responding to external market trends, cutting back on internal initiatives and, in the worst cases, reducing the size of their staffs. At times, it seems as if the rules that companies have been operating by over the past decade have evaporated, leaving leaders in a survival mindset. Ironically, this mindset is one that can lead to the neglect of an organization's culture and the core elements that first enabled their organizations to realize success.

Organizational culture is simply the values and assumptions that guide the internal and external operations of a company. It refers to “the way we do things around here”, as how employees relate to one another and to customers often provides insight into organizational values. When a company prospers, it can be easy to lose sight of these intangibles. However, organizational culture has been empirically linked to employee satisfaction, productivity, and most importantly, an organization's overall performance. Although counterintuitive, rather than falling into the trap of adopting a survival mindset, the current economic downturn provides an opportunity for leaders to rise above the fray and proactively evaluate the values and assumptions that have served as the foundation for their organization.

The culture of an organization traditionally starts with the leadership team. Therefore, the most effective and impactful way to internally evaluate culture is by gathering the leadership team together to discuss questions that revolve around the culture. Although the questions may seem simple, the answers can be complex, bewildering and highlight cultural deficiencies that need to be addressed. In order for this exercise to be effective, it is critical that each leader is honest to him/herself and the larger group.

1. ***What is our Vision?*** This question needs to be the first one addressed for multiple reasons. First, everyone needs to be clear as to the global organizational vision. Secondly, this provides a clear picture of what the company wants to be, which can be publicized to the rest of the organization. Third, a shared vision has the power to bring an executive team together. Finally, a compelling vision serves as an anchor that can pull individuals back into the fold if and when the discussion becomes difficult.
2. ***What are the values of this organization and why?*** Beware of the status quo. This question is designed to critically evaluate the current values of the organization. In other words, placing a value on a website does not mean that the value is true to the leaders of the organization. If possible, try to narrow it to the top five values. For each, ensure that there is a consensus on both its definition and its importance to the organization.
3. ***Do our values align with and promote the vision?*** Although this seems basic, organizational values can often clash with the vision. For example, if an

organization values hard work (demonstrated by 10-12 hour days), yet its vision is “to create a better world for families”, employees may wonder how they can create a better world for their own family they are always at the office. Similarly, if the vision is to be “innovative” and employees do not feel empowered to share their ideas, there is a discrepancy present.

4. ***What assumptions prop these values up?*** This is often the most difficult question to answer, as the very nature of an ‘assumption’ may preclude it from being in our conscious awareness. Yet, each value has an underlying assumption that makes it “true” for the organization. For example, if “honesty” is the value, perhaps the underlying assumption is that “only through honesty can lasting relationships be formed, which is essential for our success”. It can be advantageous to have a consultant or an objective outsider present to help facilitate this part of the discussion. Otherwise, it is important to rely on the critical thinking skills that allowed each executive to achieve their position in the first place.
5. ***Does the leadership team live these values?*** This is a primary reason that dysfunctional cultures exist. Leaders verbally promote the values of an organization, yet their actions contradict their words. Again, if “honesty” is the value, and you tell a prospective client that a product will be launched three months before its actual launch date, what message does that send the rest of the organization? There is no quicker way to lose credibility and destroy the intrinsic motivation that strong organizational values can promote. Employees look to leaders to see how they conduct themselves and will typically follow suit.

These five questions will help direct focus inward and generate discussion that can increase the awareness of cultural elements that are not aligned with organizational success. Through this exercise, leaders may uncover the existing building blocks that first allowed the organization to grow and prosper. Alternatively, they may become aware of cracks or fissures that need to be repaired. Although severe, the present economic downturn is temporary. Leaders who proactively tend to their organization’s culture can provide a solid foundation for future growth.