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WHITE PAPER

Cultural Congruence Model: A framework for examining organizational culture

*By Dr. Michael Comer
The Hayes Group International, Inc.*

The topic of organizational culture has become immensely popular in the past decade with multiple books, essays, and research studies attempting to define the concept. Business magazines like Fortune have popularized the concept of organizational culture and recently listed “positive company culture” as the thread that connects their annual 100 Best Companies to Work For survey (Levering & Moskowitz, 2001). One might question what is a “positive” culture and how does an organization analyze their culture to determine if it is positive? Can the culture be identified as “good” or “bad” or is the term relative? This author would argue that cultures are not “good” or “bad” but instead should be “congruent” in order to be effective. The author would further state that cultural effectiveness can be measured, as can congruence, by using a cultural framework called the Cultural Congruence Model.

Cultural Congruence Model Defined

The Cultural Congruence Model is based on the definition of culture and cultural analysis as espoused by Edgar Schein. “Cultural analysis is the encountering and deciphering of shared basic assumptions.” (Schein, 1992). However, this paper treats the deciphering of these assumptions as “assessment” and the determination of whether the culture is appropriate for the organization as “analysis”.

Schein’s definition of culture includes the concept of a pattern of shared assumptions that is considered valid enough to be taught to new members (Schein, 1992). It includes three basic elements: artifacts, espoused values, and assumptions. These elements are used as a basis for assessing any organizational culture.

Congruence, in this paper, is defined as the agreement or harmony between the organization’s culture, its

mission and goals, and the people within the organization. This model is based on the belief that if an organization's culture reinforces its mission and its people believes in it, the organization is more effective. Effectiveness can be measured by overall organizational performance, employee satisfaction, quality of work, customer satisfaction, and earnings/revenues. To measure this congruence, one must first determine the artifacts, values, and basic assumptions of an organization. Once these basic determinants of culture are assessed, they can be analyzed in terms of their "fit" with the mission and people. This analysis can take the form of data collection (through observation, surveys, group meetings, and individual patterned interviews), comparative analysis (real stories versus espoused values), and gap analysis (determining where the culture does not reinforce the mission or where the culture does not fit with the workers).

One may argue that when relating to people the culture should be defined and then people fit within that culture. The author believes that employees can be recruited to a certain corporate culture, but that the culture also needs to be examined periodically and adapted to changing demographics in society. Younger workers, diverse employees and external environments like globalization, deregulation, and competition may cause an organization to re-examine its culture in order to retain and recruit the best workers. It is this assumption that the Culture Congruence Model uses as a theoretical base.

The Culture Congruence Model does not attempt to be a scientifically validated instrument, but is designed to

reflect the author's thinking regarding the importance of a "congruent culture" to achieve organizational effectiveness. It is a first attempt to develop a model based on the theories of Schein and the writings of Bolman and Deal.

The model can be broken into three steps: (1) Cultural assessment (What to look for in defining an organization's culture), (2) Congruence analysis (Does the culture, mission, and workforce "fit"?), and (3) Gap determination (If there is not a "fit", what gaps exist and what change strategies can an organization use to bridge the gaps).

Analyzing culture: Assessment -What to look for

The first step in assessing a culture is to identify artifacts. Artifacts are identified by using surveys, personal interviews, or group meetings that ask participants to list their responses to various artifact categories. An example of categories for identifying artifacts include: dress codes, level of formality in authority relationships, working hours, how decisions are made, rites and rituals, myths and stories (Schein, 1999). For a more complete list, see Appendix I of this paper.

Secondly, espoused values of the organization are examined. Most organizations have written value statements that can be easily obtained. For organizations that do not have written values, a list of values can be obtained through interviews of senior management, survey and observation. The optimal word is "espoused" values, according to Argyris and Schon, since many organizations have written values but "act out" different values (Schein,

1992). This difference will be examined in part two of the model – analysis.

Thirdly, basic assumptions of the organization are identified. Perhaps the best way to identify underlying assumptions is through a process meeting – where artifacts are listed, values discussed and underlying assumptions are reviewed. This meeting, facilitated by an outsider, allows for assumptions to be identified, discussed and written (Schein, 1992). In this step, surveys are probably least effective. According to Schein,

“they only unearth some of the artifacts, some espoused values, and maybe one or two underlying assumptions.” (Schein, 1999).

Another perspective on assessing the culture is to examine it in terms of how the workforce (group) works within a symbolic frame to accomplish its goals. For example, one may examine how someone becomes a member of the group, specialized language that is used within the group, stories and history of the organization, as well as how the group uses humor and play (Bolman & Deal, 1997).

The information collected in the artifacts, values and assumption stages is written in a report format using basic bullet points for each category. It is then used to “analyze” the culture – by comparing the artifacts to the values to the assumptions. In addition, the analysis examines the “espoused” ideas versus the “real world” ideas – in terms of both mission and people.

Analyzing culture: Analysis - The congruence test

The author believes that once culture has been assessed (ultimately

arriving at a list of underlying assumptions) to actually analyze the culture, the stated culture must be compared to something (another organizational culture, actual values versus stated values, leader-driven culture versus employee-driven culture). This comparison does not necessarily make the culture “bad” or “good”, but should more appropriately measure the “fit” of the organization with its mission and people. Fern Lobo, in her article “Know the Code”, confirms this assumption, when she states culture examination includes “understanding the behaviors currently engendered and examining the behaviors that interfere with an egalitarian workplace.” (Lebo, 1997). The comparison should ultimately be between the perceived and actual cultures and whether the actual culture enhances the organization’s mission and whether it allows for development of the organization’s people. This “congruence” or harmony between culture, mission, and people can be examined in four ways.

First, using the assessment, culture artifacts can be compared to stated values to see if the physical manifestations of the organization (artifacts) are congruent with the stated values. For example, if an organization states that one of their values is innovation and learning, but does not reward people who complete additional degrees, does not schedule or pay for training, consistently tells stories how the founder made millions without a formal education, and creates a climate where formal learning is seen as “theory” not “real world”, one would assume there is a congruency gap between the value and the artifacts.

A second area of analysis examination is to compare the espoused values with the actual values of an organization and list the actual values. For example, by examining the artifacts and feelings concerning learning and innovation, one might say assume that learning in a formal sense is not a perceived value in the organization. The organization instead values practical hands on learning and a learn by doing concept.

A third way to analyze the value of culture is to examine the corporate mission and to extrapolate what type of culture would enhance the organization's mission. This concept is similar to hiring potential employees who will "fit" in the organization. Using a similar thought process, one could say in order to meet the goals of this organization, an appropriate culture would include certain elements. For example, an organization that is suddenly forced to change due to global competition, deregulation or merger, may realize that "a sense of urgency" is now important in responding to customers and relating to the environment. This new "value" must be instilled in order to fulfill the mission of the organization or even to survive as an organization.

Lastly, culture can be compared to the workforce. In this step, the workforce would be examined in terms of personal values, ideas of what is important, and personal decision-making processes. This could be done in terms of employee surveys, personal interviews, and/or personal development plans. Using this information, it is determined if the workforce reinforces the existing culture, if the culture needs changes to retain the workforce, or if individuals should be ousted from the

workforce in order to reinforce a given culture. An example of this may be a company that, due to deregulation, suddenly must work with a stronger sense of urgency as well as customer focus. If an employee's individual demeanor and behavior is not one of urgency and the culture demands this urgency, what should be done? The Cultural Congruence Model analysis attempts to take the cultural assessment, determine the right "fit" between individual and culture, show what *individual* changes are needed to meet the culture standards or what *cultural* changes are needed to retain the current workforce.

In other cases the culture may not "fit" the individual(s), and the workforce may force a cultural change. For example, companies that do not value balance of work and home life may face crises in recruiting and retaining a skilled workforce. In this case, the organization may realize that in order to achieve their mission, they must adapt the culture to the individual – changing basic assumptions about work and home life, instilling values that include "balance" and reinforcing artifacts such as flexible work times, less formality, and an enhanced emotional climate.

Analyzing culture: Implementation - Determining changes

The final step in the model is to determine changes that must be made in the organization's culture. While implementation of cultural changes is an immense undertaking and remembering that "changes rationally conceived traditionally fail" (Bolman & Deal, 1997), the gaps identified in the analysis

stage, whether between artifacts and values, espoused values and assumptions, mission and culture or culture and workforce are examined. As part of this examination, action steps toward implementing change in the organization are determined.

Due to the scope of this paper, the implementation of cultural change is not discussed here, only to note that specific “gaps” are identified and acted upon based on the cultural assessment and analysis.

Conclusion

Research from Edgar Schein and others indicate that organizational cultures can be assessed through artifacts, values, and assumptions. This author would agree but add that cultures

in themselves are neither good nor bad. Instead a culture should be congruent with the organization's mission and workforce. The Culture Congruence Model attempts to assess the culture through examination of artifacts, values, and assumptions; analyze the culture by comparing “actual” artifacts, values, and assumptions to “espoused” ones, while determining what culture is optimal for both the organization mission and workforce; and finally identify the “gaps” from the analysis and propose action steps to implement cultural change in an organization.

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Appendix I

Cultural Assessment – What to look for

Part I: Artifacts

Using the list below, describe your working environment, in terms of...

Level of formality in authority relationships

Working hours

Dress code

Meetings (how often, how run, timing)

How are decisions made?

Communications: How do you learn things about the organization?

Social events

Jargon, uniforms, identity symbols

Rites and rituals

Disagreements and conflicts: How handled?

Balance between work and family

Formality of language

Physical environment (space, privacy, status)

Part II: Values

List the stated values of your organization. If your organization does not have written value statements, value ideas can be obtained through interviews with senior management, observation, and employee surveys.

Espoused Values:

Actual Values

Part III: Assumptions

List the assumptions of your organization. These underlying assumptions may be obtained through group process meetings, observation, outside facilitator observation, and interviews.

Include in your thinking....

What people pay attention to?

What do things mean (symbols, rituals)?

Actions

Underlying meaning behind stories and myths

“Mental maps” – habits of thinking that guide perceptions, thought and language

Part IV. Group symbolism

Examine the organization in terms of socialization issues; include the following questions in your thinking.

What are the stories of the organization?

What rituals exist? What are their meanings?

What symbols exist? What are their meanings?

How does someone become a member of the “group”?

How does humor and play work within the group?

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