



Research Paper

The Leadership Quandary: Cultural Barriers to the Leadership Pipeline

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Abstract: Leadership is a complex phenomenon that requires learning rather than academic instruction and modern literature supports the idea that building leaders is a chaotic endeavour, full of risks and rewards. Every organization has its unique culture that is first spearheaded by its leaders, either by their words, actions, or their inactions. The leadership sets the tone for the kind of culture that an organization eventually takes up. This culture is then woven into the fabric of the organization through a commitment to shared values as imbibed and demonstrated by employees. But then over time every culture is embodied and visible to not only the insiders but also outsiders who relate with the organization in one way or another.

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I. Introduction

Many times, we hear about the importance of building the right culture within an organization. CEOs grant interviews on primetime shows and talk about how culture is critical to their organization's development. Human Resource (HR) departments are busy planning different culture retreats and orientations for both old and new staff. While all this is essential, there is more that is required. Beyond the rhetoric, this publication is about getting you to act today. Culture can either create a great work environment or a toxic one where people fail to meet goals, and targets, or live up to their true potential. A culture can set an organization on the trajectory of growth, or it can be the cog in the wheel of progress. *But what is organizational culture?* Organizational culture is a pattern of underlying assumptions, thinking, behaviours, ethics, and actions that explain the way people do things in each social setting. This culture is made up of values, habits, and behaviours that contribute to the overall creation of the social and psychological architecture within an organization. Simply put, culture is what makes an organization different, thick, relevant, and sustainable. Culture is also manifested through the stories, rituals, policies, structure, and aspirations that a company promotes or tolerates, evidenced by the day-to-day affairs of its people.

What Drives Organizational Culture

Many leaders devote more attention to their visions, financials, sales targets, business models, and hiring but less on building an enduring culture; probably because they figure it's not that important, or, somehow, it is going to fix itself down the road. Nothing could be further from the truth. Culture plays a big role in the survival and sustainability of any organization. But before we go into why culture kills corporations; we must look first at what drives organizational culture. This knowledge is necessary for leaders across all levels, especially those who want to build thriving organizations in both today's market and the one for the future. When it comes to organizational culture, there are elements to pay attention to: Artefacts, Espoused values, and Assumptions as advocated by Schein (1992).

- **Artefacts:** These are signs or representations of the organizational culture in the social and physical work environment. These artifacts can appear in five distinct forms.

1. **Personal Enactment:** These are the behaviours exhibited by employees that reflect and showcase the organization's values in one way or another. So when employees fail to reflect the principles of the organization, it is only a sign that there is trouble looming on the horizon.

2. **Ceremonies & Rites:** There are different types of celebrations and rites that occur in an organization. An example is the rite of passage, where individuals, teams, or departments are habitually celebrated for their achievements or special events. Examples of ceremonies and rituals include staff retreats, birthday celebrations, fun days, the end-of-year review, and so on. Ceremonies and rites are not daily occurrences; they happen less frequently, and one may be tempted to believe that it is not important to define the corporate culture (Martin, 2012). Yet, this cultural element plays a huge role in boosting the morale of team members while increasing engagement within the workforce. Ceremonies and rites help to foster and cultivate a supportive social culture that enables an organization to thrive.

3. **Stories:** These are narratives told by the founders, staff, and leaders of past exploits, milestones, challenges, successes, and aspirations. Stories are known to shape cultures when they are told the right way. Over time stories become legends and take on a life of their own in affecting the way people think, act, and view the world (and workplace) around them. Stories are a powerful way to tell and convey the values and extend the heritage of any organization.

4. **Rituals & Symbols:** These are activities that are done regularly and repeated frequently by a team or department. They reinforce the values and beliefs of an organization in practical and substantial ways. Examples of rituals include training, orientation, and employee's day or week. While *Symbols* are unspoken messages within and outside an organization that are conveyed through images such as the company logos, colours, icons, and even mental images held by employees (Martin, 2012).

- **Espoused Values:** The EV element explains how an organization, through its management team, explains its culture to insiders (employees), allies (investors, clients), and outsiders (public). These espoused values are expressed in official documents like official policies, procedure documents, handbooks, manuals, visions, press releases, mission statements, flyers, souvenirs, and so on (Hattangadi, 2018).

- **Assumptions:** These are hidden beliefs, only discovered after one has been in an organization for a while. These hidden beliefs are not written but are often understood and followed by all or most persons in the organization. These elements are not documented anywhere, but the people practice them, nonetheless. They are the traditional unofficial ways things are done in any organization. When new people join an organization, without being told or taught, they tend to pick up assumptions over time.

Having looked at the different elements of organizational culture, let's look at the different types of corporate cultures that exist. For this publication, we will narrow down to four organizational cultures, and how they are exhibited in every organization.

1. **Clan Culture:** Collaboration is the buzzword in this type of culture. Members of this culture share and have a lot of common interests and view themselves as part of a big family. The leadership style that is often manifested in this kind of cultural environment is one of mentoring, coaching, and brotherhood. What binds this kind of organization is mutually held traditions and shared commitment. The espoused values in this culture are things like teamwork, communication, openness, and consensus (Aktas et. al., 2011).

2. **Adhocracy Culture:** Energy and creativity are the buzzwords in this type of culture. Members of the culture are continually encouraged to take risks and explore new or better ways of doing things. Employees in this kind of environment are innovators, disruptors, entrepreneurs, or intrapreneurs. What holds this type of culture together are virtues like experimentation, can-do spirit, agility, and the freedom to try new things (Aktas et. al., 2011).

3. **Market Culture:** This culture is built on the dynamics of achieving concrete results, marketplace rivalry, domination, or competition. The main focus of this culture is goal-oriented born out of a desire to win large or all market share. The leadership style often showcased by management in this type of culture is marked by toughness, big ambition, and a demanding disposition. Usually, the factor that holds this culture together is the common goal to succeed and win over rivals. The espoused values of this culture include things like market share dominance, takeover, high shareholder value, and profitability (Aktas et. al., 2011).

4. **Hierarchy Culture:** This culture is founded on both structure and control. It is characterized by a formal environment with strict institutional procedures that guide the organization and the behaviour of its people. The leadership style that often works in this culture is one of organized coordination and monitoring. Efficiency and predictability are what bind people that operate in this culture, and the espoused values of this culture are consistency, hierarchy, and uniformity. Think of the military or government agencies; they usually work with this type of culture (Aktas et. al., 2011).

Culture impacts the growth of every organization. But unfortunately, many leaders today are still unaware of how culture is intricately tied to what they do, who they are, and the results they produce. Or in some cases, they may have an idea of the culture that their organization needs but they fail (or don't know how) to translate it into concrete terms to those that they lead. The truth is building a formidable culture is not a walk in the park. It requires effort, time, and consistency. Culture, or at least a part of it, is also not static but prone to improvement over time. As a leader, the culture you build should never be rigid; instead, it should be one that can be improved upon and helps you stay competitive in the evolving times.

Sadly again, a lot of organizations soon find them being weighed down when competing cultures gain the upper hand in their day-to-day activities. In this situation, it soon becomes apparent to everyone, both employees and clients, that the espoused values are not being enacted. Soon productivity takes plummet and employees begin to develop a different mindset from that of the company. And with those who are frustrated because of a flawed culture compared to what they perceived when they joined the organization, the inevitable sets in the organization start to tear apart.

A Clash of Cultures

When there is a lack of definition of what your organizational culture is and a strong adherence to it, you end up having people creating and exhibiting different behaviours that are diametrically opposite to what your organization truly stands for. Don't fall into this trap. At other times, leaders try to copy the cultures of other organizations without taking into consideration their own corporate DNA. Transferring cultural values without due diligence will always create confusion or what is known as a *culture clash*. When building a culture, you must be clear on what fits into the kind of organization you want to develop and what doesn't. When that is done, it behooves on you to enforce the needed culture through and through within your organization. Without proper enforcement, you send the wrong message to your people that the culture is not essential after all.

Just like I stated earlier, juxtaposing opposing cultures will always lead to tussle. But as a leader, you also need to be aware that people who join your organization bring with them various cultures wherever they are coming from as individuals. There is also the culture of the society that often rubs off on people (Ellinas et. al., 2017). Therefore, it is your job to ensure that your organization's culture is not at the mercy of whatever culture they are coming with. You are simply the lead culture engineer in your organization. At best, let your culture become the filtering mechanism that is positioned right at the door, even before anyone joins your organization.

Culture clash can also happen in the case of corporate mergers and acquisitions of two or more companies. If there is no serious alignment between these cultures, it will eventually affect corporate performance, impact employee morale, and derail focus. Forward-thinking organizations spend enough time and resources discussing and agreeing on cultural differences before choosing to forge partnerships. Because, ultimately, what defines the way people work and the results they produce is their culture. This philosophy has been backed up by studies like Berberoglu (2018) which found that the organizational climate of any organization is significantly tied to the organization's commitment and perceived performance.

Understanding culture is paramount for those in leadership positions throughout any organization. Culture serves as a guide to every employee, giving them a sense of direction on how things are or should be done. Culture doesn't only dictate the way employees interact with one another; it also governs how they interact with clients, investors, suppliers, and other stakeholders. A healthy culture is one that promotes innovation, shared commitment, fulfillment, accountability, integrity, and performance among team members.

As a leader, if you realize that your culture is not supporting your organizational growth, it is time to change course. Make a list of what is not working and be flexible enough to improve or try something else. Changing cultural direction can be expensive, some people might even stand against it, but if it is the right thing to do, then it is worth every penny and resilience. Don't be tempted to stick with the status quo when the situation calls for a change. The truth is that changing your culture might require you to make tough decisions like letting go of certain people, shutting down certain branches or departments, or pivoting to another business entirely. While this is not as easy as it sounds, it might be the solution you need to turn things around. We have seen organizations that went out of business, not because they had bad products or poor marketing strategies. It was just that they failed in managing their entire culture architecture, leading to people operating at crossroads within the organization. Culture engenders focus while also giving direction and meaning to every action taken by the people. Without culture, boundaries cease to exist, an occurrence that is capable of bringing any organization to its knees.

Cultivating leadership development

At the core of every organizational growth is the *human element*. People play a critical role in how far or big your organization will end up. Without the right people, every other plan comes crashing down. They can also be a huge drag to your progress if the culture that they operate by is contrary to what the organization needs

to get to the next level. Therefore, effective leadership means staying proactive. It is not only about installing the culture that your people need to win but also enforcing it every day both in words and by actions. As a leader, you must mirror the culture you want to build within your organization. It was Mahatma Gandhi who said, “*Be the change you wish to see.*” We have seen many organizations with nice-sounding vision and value statement, only for the leaders to turn around and sabotage them by their actions. It is very hard to install the right culture if you don’t lead from the front. As a leader, you must learn to walk the talk; because any culture that you do not subject yourself to, will never work.

Almost all successful companies have developed something special that supersedes market presence, corporate strategy, or technological advantages. They have found the power that resides in developing and managing a unique and distinct corporate culture. One reason for this is that managers in charge of leadership development efforts are so embedded in their own cultures that those cultures are practically invisible to them. A good way to begin your organization’s leadership development efforts is to renew the organization’s business drivers and assess its culture. So, an organizational culture that encourages and recognizes new behaviours goes a long way toward building a sustainable leadership capacity and once you have a clearer understanding of your organizational culture, you can pinpoint how it may be hindering or enhancing leadership development efforts in your organization (Bal & Quinn, 2001).

Leadership roles and processes are those that facilitate setting direction, creating alignment, and maintaining commitment in groups of people who share common work. It entails the expansion of collective capacity to produce direction, alignment, and commitment. However, how leadership is learned from experience with how the entire systems are crafted, refined, and enhanced over time explained the essence of design in the process. Bell (2006) opined that for a worthwhile effort, there must be a significant shift in leadership development from a top-down instruction-based approach to developing leaders through workable organizational systems and design.

Viewing leadership as a collective phenomenon has several implications for leadership development. Firstly, the leadership culture rather than the individual leader becomes the target for leadership development. However, the goal is to increase the degree to which the collective’s culture produces direction, alignment, and commitment. Secondly, the process includes leader or individual development, relationship development, team development, organisation development, changes in the pattern of behaviour in the collective and changes in organisational systems and design. A large force in shaping culture is the stories that circulate through the organisation, and these stories illustrate extreme manifestations of the culture. Nordstrom, one of the most successful retailers in the United States, has a robust culture centered on customer service. This culture is reflected in stories of regular employees who went beyond their call of duty to serve the customer by becoming legends and heroes. They never underestimate their leadership decided to create a climate conducive to the respect and inclusion of all social identities.

As we advance, the comparison among leadership development, organisational culture and the various leadership approaches takes us to the context of organisational systems that enhance leadership development by leading oneself through self-awareness, learning engines, values and managing conflicts, leading others through relationships, communication skills, and coaching and leading the organisation through management skills, intuitive skills, and strategic thinking. All point towards the skills and traits approach of leadership embedded in organizational culture that created the systems of continuous development of leaders. So, when leaders develop other leaders, a virtuous cycle is created, and the network of relationships increases. Often, there is more and more pressure to accelerate how leaders learn, grow, and develop within the context of social identity since everybody has a social identity. Hence, for leaders to build leadership capabilities, organizations must account for social identity dynamics during the design of leadership development systems and acknowledge the importance of social identity by reviewing and restricting systemic influences through an inclusive organizational culture.

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