

Practical Steps to Culture Change - Part 1

Written by Sarah Cook

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In this article, the first of three, Sarah Cook describes the practical steps to help bring about culture change in your organisation.

As an OD, Learning and Development or HR professional, you may be asked to help bring about culture change in your organisation. But is this a realistic goal? What are the actions that you can take to help 'unfreeze' your culture and move people towards a new way of doing things?

Management psychologist Schein describes culture as a phenomenon that surrounds us all. Culture according to Schein is "A pattern of shared basic assumptions that a group learns as it solves problems". Culture is not often discussed in people's day to day work. It is the glue that binds the organisation together. Culture manifests itself through aspects of the business such as:

- Behaviour: language, customs, traditions
- Groups norms: standards and values
- Espoused values: published, publicly announced organisational values
- Formal Philosophy: the mission and vision of the organisation
- Rules of the Game: the unspoken rules by which employees live within the organisation
- Climate: the climate of interaction across the business
- Metaphors, stories, rituals and symbols.

In order to shift the culture in an organisation, it is essential to have a clear vision of where the organisation needs to be:

Where are we now?

What are the actions to bridge the gap?

Where do we want to be?

And to then describe the changes that are needed to bridge the gap.

By creating and clearly articulating a vision for the future, leaders have an opportunity to engage and motivate employees in its delivery. The rate of culture change will depend on a number of factors such as the degree of necessity to change, the speed and urgency of change and the degree of commitment from employees. It is typical for businesses to take three to five years to change the culture and it is estimated that 60% of culture change programmes do not succeed.

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L&D and HR professionals are in a unique position to help facilitate a process with leaders for creating a compelling vision of the future. For example you can encourage leaders to describe their aspirations for the organisation in the new world, what customers and other key stakeholders will say, feel and see, how employees will behave – what they will say, do and feel in the future for the vision to come alive. You can also play a key role in supporting leaders when they articulate the vision for the future and in challenging them if the vision is not:

- Articulated simply and clearly
- Inspiring
- Motivating
- Engaging – both on an emotional and intellectual basis
- Memorable

An additional practical step that L&D, OD and HR professionals can take in the initial stages of change is to help raise people's awareness of the current culture within the organisation, to articulate the unarticulated.

In the next article in this series I look at some practical techniques to do this.

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References: Schein, Edgar Organizational Culture and Leadership (1985) ISBN 1-55542-487-2

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