

Steps of changing an organisation's culture

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Changing an organisation's culture is not as simplistic as one would think. This is mainly due to the assumption that once set, commonly shared interpretations, values, and patterns are difficult to adjust. However, once it has been ascertained that culture change is a desired objective, employees of an organisation can engage in a set of steps that will put a culture modification process in motion. The outcome of these steps is a process for moving an organisation's culture from the current state to the preferred future state. These steps are based on the work of several authors who have described successful change interventions aimed at organisational culture change, these steps initiate change in individual and organisational procedures, colloquies, language, motifs, and values, none of which by itself ensures that culture change will occur, but in combination they create a great deal of momentum toward cardinal cultural changes in organisations.

Clarification

Moving toward one particular type of culture does not mean that other culture types should be abandoned or ignored. It means only that special emphasis must be placed on certain variables if the culture change is going to be successful. The first step in culture change is to clarify what it means and what it doesn't mean for the organisation's culture to change. The purpose of this step is to clarify for the organisation the things that won't change as well as the things that will. Wilkins (1989) identified the importance of building on corporate character in any change effort, that is, on the core competencies, the unique mission, and the special organisational identity that has been created over time. An organisation should not abandon core aspects of what makes it unique, whereas some other aspects

of the organisation will need to be transformed. Identifying what culture change means and doesn't mean helps remind the organisation about what will be preserved as well as what will be changed. It attaches specific meaning to the idea that culture change will occur.

Identifying stories

Since organisational culture is best communicated through stories, a second step in the culture change process is to identify one or two positive incidents or events that illustrate the key values that will characterise the organisation's future culture. That is, real incidents, events, or stories are recounted publicly in order help individuals capture a sense of what the culture will be like when the new culture is in place. The key values, desired orientations, and behavioural principles that are to characterise the new culture are more clearly communicated through stories than in any other way. Not only do these stories help clarify the culture change, but individuals are less anxious about moving into an unknown future when they can carry parts of the past with them. When the parts of the past being carried forward are examples of best practices, peak performance, and aspirational levels of achievement, organisation members are motivated to pursue them, they are clear about what is to be accomplished by the change, and they can identify with the core values being illustrated.

Determining strategic initiatives

Strategic initiatives involve the activities that will be started, stopped, and enhanced. They are actions designed to make major changes that will produce culture change. Most organisations have much more difficulty stopping something than starting it, so identifying what won't be pursued is

a difficult but critical step. Identifying what is to be started is a way to help the organisation think of strategic initiatives that have not been previously pursued. Identifying what is to be stopped helps focus resources and energy so that non-value-added activities – usually characteristic of the previous culture – will not inhibit the change process. Identifying what is to be enhanced implies that some activities being pursued currently can engender change if they are enhanced with more resources, more attention, or more leadership.

Identifying small wins

The modus operandi behind small wins is to find something easy to change, change it, and make it publicly known amongst employees. Small wins are immediate actions that represent baby steps in the direction of culture change. They can be implemented immediately, but none of them by themselves represent a notable change. Small successes create momentum in the desired direction, impede resistance-since seldom do people resist small, imperceptible changes-and create a contagion effect so that additional supporters get on board. When individuals see that something is changing, even if it is small in scope, a sense of progress and advancement is created, and that sense helps build support for the larger and more important changes.

Documenting important measures and milestones

Determining the key indices of success, what to measure, how to measure it, and when certain levels of progress will be noted is a pivotal part of the change process. A data gathering system needs to be designed as does a time frame for assessing the results. What gets measured gets attention, so

the vital initiatives and outcomes must have metrics and measuring processes associated with them. The principal behind good metrics, measures, and milestones is to identify few enough to be helpful, attach them to decisions and resource allocations, attach them to the key levers and indicators of change, and ensure that they are understood by those involved in the culture change process.

Communication and symbols

Communicating the culture change process, is an imperative tool in helping to overcome resistance and generate commitment. Explaining why the culture change is necessary and beneficial is probably the most crucial step in engendering commitment. Building coalitions of supporters among key opinion leaders, involving individuals most affected by the changes, and empowering individuals to implement aspects of the change process are also ways to help reduce resistance. Sharing as much information as possible on a regular basis, and as broadly as possible, helps prevent the tendency people have to make up their own information in the presence of ambiguity or scepticism.

Another important initiative that accompanies culture change is a change in symbols. Symbols are visual portrayals of the new state, so identifying symbols that imply a new future is an important part of culture change. Symbols help organisation members envision something different, provide a new analysis of the organisation, and provide a meeting place for people supportive of the change. New logos, new structures, new events, new charters, or other emblematic rallying points can also be used.

Leadership development

All organisational changes require leadership and owners. Culture change seldom occurs aimlessly or inadvertently in organisations, and it requires leaders who are consciously and persistently directing the process. Each aspect of the culture change process – for example, each strategic initiative, each communication process, and so forth – needs a leader or someone who accepts ownership for its successful implementation. Accountability is maintained best when specific individuals are designated as owners of the initiative – and an array of owners helps ensure broad participation and commitment. Not only must current leaders advocate the culture change, but a comrade of future leaders must be prepared to lead the organisation when the culture change has been put in place. The new leadership competencies that will be required in the preferred future culture must be specified. Differences between current leadership and future leadership requirements should be articulated.