

The Link Between Culture and Change

By Jamie Notter

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You want your Association to succeed, so you turn to a seminar or the latest business literature and read the latest on customer service, leadership, or execution. You're motivated by Jim Collins' *Good to Great* or the many other worthwhile ideas out there and try to implement programs to develop your leaders, execute better, wow your customers, or keep your employees engaged.

There's just one problem—when you look around, you see that not much has changed. Your results are about the same as they were before you got all fired up, and your visions of emotionally intelligent leaders, or of a “family” of powerful employees have not been realized. Was all that business training a waste of time?

In a word, no. No business book or seminar will spell out exactly how you can transform your organization, because your organization is unique. It has its own collection of tacit assumptions and patterns of behavior that provide a subtext of how things are done at your organization. It's called culture, and for any organizational philosophy to go from motivational seminars or books to relevance in practice, you must consider the culture of your organization.

Imagine you decide to restructure your organization to make it “flatter,” pushing decision-making authority down the chain, because scores of books, articles, and consultants have demonstrated that such a change would yield better performance. In your organization, however, managers and staff have learned over the years that success comes with deferring to the hierarchy and waiting to see what superiors say before taking action. This is not written in the bylaws, nor was it announced at a staff meeting. It is just the way things get done—it is a cornerstone of your culture.

Faced with new structures and reporting relationships, employees and managers alike stumble and hesitate, because the behaviors with a proven track record of success in this organization (deferring up the chain) are suddenly devalued. When faced with a choice between a new idea pushed by a consultant (or even an organizational leader) and years of their own successful experience, people tend to rely on their experience and will likely sabotage the change effort, either intentionally or unintentionally.

It's not that the original advice is wrong. It's that good advice needs to be integrated into the existing culture in order to work. To do this, you need to understand your culture. Look beyond the language in your mission and vision statements. Look beyond the posters on the walls with inspirational quotes about teamwork. Look at the physical layout of your office. Look at who eats lunch together. Ask people what it takes to get things done, and when they answer, read between the lines to get at the core assumptions underlying your culture. This will provide outstanding guidance as you implement new management programs.

It's also important to realize that your organization's culture has been evolving since its founding. Changing culture is not a revolutionary process; it is evolutionary. If the management program is starkly different than your current culture, give it plenty of time to take hold. Develop a program of small steps, giving each innovation time to take hold (and establish new patterns) before introducing additional changes.

Finally, it's important to consider what stage of the organizational life cycle your association is in. Start-up cultures can be flexible, but they are often closely connected to the personal values of the founders. Mid-life organizations have established cultures, but they often react well to small-scale, evolutionary change. Cultures in mature organizations, on the other hand, are more embedded and may be difficult to change without a major shake up, which might spawn unimagined consequences.

For more information contact Jamie Notter, President of Notter Consulting. Tel: 240-603-7693; Email: jamie@notterconsulting.com