

Building Blocks of Culture for Facilities Management—Part II, Strategy

By Matt Adams, P.E.



In our last column (March/April 2019), we discussed the definition of culture, what it means to the facilities management industry, and why it's important to us as leaders and to our staff. We discussed values as a core element of culture, and the importance of recognizing that all organizations have a culture whether they engage, nurture, and manage it, or whether they just accept it by default. In other words, our organization has a culture by design or by default—or sometimes a combination of the two.

Recently during an APPA Level 3 Leadership Academy at the University of Chicago, the class explored the benefits of culture to the organization and to themselves as leaders. One of the benefits for each leader is that culture is one of the most effective tools to enable an organization to succeed. Culture is

a tool that leaders embrace to achieve results in their absence while they are home from work, on vacation, or even retired. To the up-and-coming leader, culture is the “glue” that unites the staff, even when leadership is not present. It's important to accept that culture needs to be designed, guided, and nurtured.

The critical first building block of creating culture, discussed in the previous column, is to carefully select the values that we want to represent it. The next building block is to develop a strategy for creating the culture around our selected values. This strategy is unique in that the results are not specifically a physical item like a building or a task, but a largely intangible environment that permeates our organization. Nevertheless, while primarily intangible, the basic elements of culture can be designed, measured, and implemented using many of the best practices that businesses employ today. For this strategy, we need an inclusive purpose, a method of measurement, a shared language, and a thoughtful implementation plan.

Creating culture by design is hard work. For virtually everyone in our organization, it will be the first time they have tried something like this; that will be true even for our leaders. As with most other endeavors, this work is made easier and more productive when those involved see the value in it. In the simplest sense, it's a “what's in it for me” (WIIFM) paradigm.

THE PURPOSE OF CHANGE

The reason or purpose for creating this culture should be explored with our teams and staff so that everyone sees value in this difficult but important work. This is the first step in creating cultural change. The idea is that every individual in our organization should not only understand their culture but recognize it, and hopefully, see that not only the organization and the institution benefits from it, but that they too benefit.

For example, take some of the negative factors that exist in many workplaces. In doing the “look-back” exercise described in the previous column, an organization might find that they have a negative or limiting value of low trust. This limiting value of low trust has a negative impact on the level of job fulfillment experienced by many employees in our organization. The converse of this is a high-trust organization, or an organization that values trust. For those who have experienced a low-trust environment, envisioning an environment of high trust allows them to see a workplace they can enjoy. In many ways, it’s as simple as that. Others who perhaps don’t have an issue with a specific limiting value may see the purpose of this initiative as enabling the organization to get more work done or to be more effective. To these people, culture leverages the work they already perform and makes their job more satisfying.

To another group within our organization, defining and designing a culture provides clarity. This is a form of cultural communication. Working in an organization where staff members have a clear vision of what they are trying to achieve and what is expected of them is a form of clarity that many employees greatly desire and do not currently have. This obvious growth value provides a reason for some to undertake the hard work of cultural change.

The discussion of how culture benefits the individual leads to the next step—the discussion of what it does for the organization as a whole. It is important not only to continue to identify the benefits of cultural change but to better understand the connectivity that must be achieved for the change to be successful. In other words, the individual must understand that the benefits of a value-based culture directly impact our leaders, our peers and coworkers, those whom we lead, our customers, and even our vendors.

A careful examination of the wide reach of culture provides further evidence of the reasons for undertaking this sometimes uncomfortable transformation. The organization should spend as much time as required on this step, not only for the reasons described above, but because many individuals have become discouraged by the limiting values of their previous culture and may need extra

time to see that this approach is proactive, inclusive, and mutually beneficial to all.

THE MEASUREMENT OF CHANGE

The next step of our strategy is to design a form of measurement. Many feel that culture cannot be measured—I disagree. In fact, when done properly, almost all the elements of an organization can be measured; the creation of an empirical scale for culture is both straightforward and meaningful. There are two types of information that will come from this empirical scale. The first is the baseline measurement or the starting point for our cultural change initiative; we need to know where we’re starting from so that we can later measure our progress and make adjustments as necessary. The same scale is used with subsequent updates and alterations that measure the continuous improvement of our adoption of a values-based culture.

After selecting the values that we choose for our future culture, we need to give these values descriptors. These descriptors are carefully selected to represent basic first impressions or feelings that those in our organization may identify with when presented with each value. Each value could have six descriptors, with

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Please provide specific examples that currently illustrate our values.

Value	Respect	Safety	Responsiveness	Collaboration	Accountability	Quality
Descriptor	• Consideration	• Security	• Answer	• Teamwork	• Reliable	• Exceptional
	• Appreciation	• Assurance	• Actionable	• Partnership	• Responsible	• Preeminence
Descriptor	• Regard	• Safeness	• React	• Alliance	• Trustworthy	• Caliber
	• Criticism	• Danger	• Disregard	• Division	• Irresponsible	• Poor
	• Dishonor	• Exposure	• Ignore	• Separation	• Reckless	• Inferior
	• Neglect	• Vulnerability	• Overlook	• Noncooperation	• Careless	• Substandard

Value	Respect	Safety	Responsiveness	Collaboration	Accountability	Quality
Examples						

three being of increasingly positive value and three of increasingly negative value. These descriptors are presented in random order as choices for each value. This is done to prevent the survey participant from picking values based on a perceived score versus their intrinsic first impression or reaction to the value.

The interpretation of these scores provides our baseline or initial score but also the identification of potential limiting values or the converse of our growth values. For example, if trust were one of our values, and a survey respondent selected a descriptor of “I am not trusted at all,” the score might be a -3. It could also be interpreted as a limiting value or evidence of a low-trust environment. The goals for improvement could take the form of eliminating such limiting values from our culture, while nurturing and improving the growth values of our culture.

The mathematical or empirical portion of the scale is the second type of information that will result from this survey, and comes later, when the administrator evaluates the data and conducts follow-up surveys.

Above is an example of what the initial survey might look like. Notice that there is room for the respondents to include free-form comments to help further clarify their opinions; the scoring is applied later (ranging from +1 to +3 on the positive side, and -1 to -3 on the negative side). This is the empirical element of the scale.


Please select three descriptors that currently define facilities services values in our organization.

THE LANGUAGE OF CHANGE

In addition to the creation of the empirical scale, the basic strategy for cultural change requires a definition

of shared language and basic ground rules. It is sometimes pointed out in APPA’s leadership classes that just selecting a value is not enough; a more expansive definition of how that value is to be interpreted by the participants is needed. This explanation should be compiled by a representative working team that includes all levels of the organization, including those in non-leadership positions. The final result might be as simple as a one-page explanation of what trust means for your facility department. This would not replace the individual employee’s view of trust, but provides a general guideline of the basic interpretation of that value for everyone.

Besides the explanation of our selected values, the publication and teaching of a new vocabulary is also important. This vocabulary is to include the basic terms, phrases, best practices, and other forms of new content that everyone should become familiar with to benefit from a shared language used to achieve cultural change. To some this may seem redundant or unnecessary—but it never is. Senior leaders often think that a value or concept stands on its own and is easily interpreted by the staff of your organization, but this is rarely the case. The creation of this shared language requires the humble and intentional participation of all those involved.

In our next column, we’ll explore how cultural change can be implemented. 

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