Building Blocks of Culture for Facilities Management—Part I, Values

By Matt Adams, P.E.

It seems like a good time for the APPA community to address "culture" in our organizations. Our college football coaching peers on campus can't do an ESPN interview without discussing the importance of culture for their respective programs. In the old days there were only two types of culture in the NCAA: winning or losing. That was way too simple, and coaches know it now. It would be like saying there are only two types of culture in facilities management (FM): productive and unproductive. There is so much more to culture than these simplifications.

To point out how much perceptions can change, Georgia Tech (GT) recently hired a new coach from Temple University, Geoff Collins. He emphasizes his vision of the new culture he will create at GT at every interview. He describes it as "cool, fun, and successful." It's only a matter of time before some of the leaders in our industry start defining the culture of their FM organizations with more colorful adjectives.

To start this discussion in the FM profession, we first need to understand the basics of culture. During a recent meeting I was asked by a leader at a well-known university to define culture. My first response was that culture is "the thing that guides the behaviors of every individual in our organization, especially when the leaders are not around."

It's a sloppy definition, I know, but more or less correct. And if you don't have a definition of your own to share with peers and direct reports, you had better get one. If you don't understand the concept, you will not be able to recognize your individual role in impacting the culture of your department.

BUILDING BLOCK 1: VALUES

The first building block of an organization's culture consists of the values it is based upon. Without values, an organization will adopt a culture based on the values demonstrated by the strong personalities of the organization or institution. These may not be admirable values. If you look back on your career, it's likely that you had at least one previous employer with an unhealthy culture. This happens when the leaders of an institution don't proactively build and manage culture in a positive way.

Organizational self-reflection is the best first step of this values determination. Unless an organization is brand new, a culture already exists there, and it needs to be understood. It's likely that some of the values it is currently based upon are not desirable.

For service-related organizations like those associated with APPA, the values that drive cultures fall into one of three areas: Hierarchical, Transactional, and Philosophical. To perform a self-assessment, a

working group can facilitate meetings to gather input from a broad cross-section of the organization, while answering questions associated with the three areas of their current culture.

Hierarchical

1) How is goal setting done within our department?
2) How are major decisions made to meet goals?
3) How are monthly and weekly decisions made?
4) Do employees feel empowered to make creative or proactive decisions?

Transactional

1) Do leaders actively assist direct reports in their pursuits?
2) Do peers actively support each other's success?
3) Is each level of management given approval authority for 80 percent or more of likely decision scenarios?
4) Can qualified staff perform their job with little or no approvals for supplies or tools?
5) Are budgets created at each level of the organization and utilized?
6) Is information shared between departments openly, with all information available online or upon request, or is it shared with some degree of difficulty?

Philosophical

1) What are the obviously unique characteristics of this workplace compared to other organizations where staff have worked previously?
2) Do we emphasize people or performance?
3) Which is more important, celebrating successes or avoiding mistakes?
4) On a scale from 1 to 10, how does each level of the organization rate the openness of communication they receive from higher levels?
5) What level of concern/benevolence do employees feel that the department demonstrates toward them and their family?
6) Does the department embrace a diversity of backgrounds and opinions?
7) Does our institution trust its employees?
8) Are employees encouraged to grow professionally even if it might mean they eventually move on?
9) Do our employees feel secure in their jobs?

Some might believe that doing this forensic look at their existing culture is a waste of time, but the opposite is true. This exercise provides many profound benefits. First, it affords the trades group of the department—who make up the largest percentage of the staff—a powerful reason to meet and discuss the issues that affect them daily. In addition, if done slowly and methodically, it allows those who are hesitant to contribute an opportunity for freedom of thought and expression. In other words, one could poll senior leadership about these questions and get a relatively quick and concise answer. However, those answers are not likely to represent the culture experienced by most of the staff—and therefore will not give an accurate portrayal.

Finally, this exercise educates participants about the nature and intricacies of culture. We can learn about culture by seeing the culture our department is already immersed in from a new perspective. This exercise should result in a group of common themes that emerge from the answers provided by a broad spectrum of participants from the department. These repeating themes can then be further condensed into three to five characteristics or values—or perhaps even negative values if necessary. It is important to recognize the positive values demonstrated in our current cultures, so as to avoid disrupting the good that we find there.

COLLECTING THE EVIDENCE

Once our staff has helped identify the themes of the current culture, the next step is to point out examples of the "evidence" or "artifacts" of these themes. This too has a therapeutic and educational benefit for our staff as well as for leadership. For each theme, participants should prioritize the artifacts that illustrate current cultural themes. These artifacts have either been actively created or passively accepted by our organization. Our understanding of their nature allows us to better design, create, and sustain new artifacts for the future culture we desire.

Artifacts might be processes, practices, behaviors, or even physical items. For example, suppose that a theme for your department is "low trust." Some artifacts to illustrate this characteristic could be low approval limits for materials, locked storage cages for equipment, multiple time-tracking processes, and other such issues readily seen in our industry. Doing this work ultimately defines the specifications of the culture you presently have in place. It is documented, shared, and discussed for the reasons previously mentioned. This is far more effective than having staff sit through theoretical, didactic lectures about culture.

Once the themes have been fleshed out, the stage

is set to define the positive values you want to base your culture upon. The "positive" aspect of these values comes from fact that they are selected by the leadership to align with the greater strategic plan of the institution. These values may be a set of more than five, and the department allows staff to weigh in on those they see as most valuable. From this larger group of values, a smaller group of three to five are selected. By definition, value descriptors are short and easy to understand. Jeff Marcinkowski, the maintenance supervisor at Grand Valley State University (GVSU), shared his institution's values and a plan for building culture around them at APPA U recently.

The GVSU cultural values shared by Marcinkowski are family, individual health, and teamwork. GVSU has an organized and repeatable strategy for building a culture around these values. It's important to notice that there are only three values named. More than five is too many to allow the focus required to create a culture. Selection of these values is a group effort and must include input from the entire organization, if possible. Some examples are transparency, collaboration, responsiveness, quality, respect, individual growth, and diversity.

MORE TO COME

The next step in building culture is the strategic building block. This step may actually be a part of the overall departmental strategic plan, which is preferable, but sometimes the two initiatives are not so conveniently aligned chronologically. I will address the cultural strategy in the next piece on culture. 🖐

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