Measuring to Help Manage Organizational Culture

By Matt Adams, P.E.

It is not uncommon to find our peers using metrics or key performance indicators to measure the output of service departments and the systems within the same. We measure time, quality, accuracy, efficiency, funding, and more. In fact, APPA's Facilities Performance Indicators report (FPI) lists well over 100 metrics that are readily applied to our operations.

MEASURING CULTURE

Despite this, I have heard of very few institutions that are measuring their workplace culture. This seems odd considering it is one of the most important aspects of our organizations. The famous professor Peter Drucker once said, "Culture eats strategy for breakfast." If you have been to the APPA Leadership Academy you have heard this. His words ring true. It's the culture of our organization that enables, promotes, facilitates, and drives the demonstration of our organizational values.

A manager can drive some behaviors with "carrots and sticks," but that won't last. Properly managed culture keeps the organization performing the actions, routines, and behaviors that demonstrate our values while no leader is present. It is the culture that inspires a team member to make that extra effort, stay another five minutes, or take the time to return a call to a campus customer even though it's already 5:30 p.m.

Given that this aspect of our organizations is so important, why don't more of us actively measure and manage culture? My belief is that it seems too intangible and therefore unmanageable and/or unmeasurable. This is not true, and the private sector is already doing it. I really do believe that anything can be measured when designed properly. This includes culture.

SELECT VALUES WITH CARE

The culture of an organization is defined by a set of values. In the absence of these values being selected proactively, they emerge organically based on a variety of factors that we may or may not condone (a topic for another discussion). Nevertheless, values, like goals or projects, should be selected with care so they are specific and actionable but not too numerous.

Statistically only one to five values can be effectively managed within an organization. These values must apply specifically to our facility operations and not to others in the institution outside our influence. That's not to say that our values may not be shared with others on campus; this strategy is an ideal one when facilitated campus-wide. But values by definition are very difficult to perfect. They are not goals that can be achieved completely within a year or two, but aspirational targets that an organization can always improve upon. So relevance is important. While there are many values with great importance, we ultimately want to reinforce those that improve our organizations.

Say for example that we take the lead on facilities management operations for all residence halls on campus. In alignment with overall campus values, we might come to consensus on the following values that we desire to shape our culture: transparency, customer service, and respect of the individual. To create a system of measurement for culture, we must first define our system of management. We can measure a system by rating short-, medium-, and long-term actions, routines, and examples that define and reinforce our culture.

Starting with transparency, our cultural management plan might initially look like this:

Transparency: A culture of transparency is one without secrets and shares information accurately and openly.

Target: Develop a communication program that informs everyone within our organization in a comprehensive, timely, and interactive manner.

Routines, Actions, and Examples:
1. Develop a standard management report template this quarter that all

managers provide to their staff on a monthly basis.

2. All managers to engage in three or more informal discussions of current departmental events per week with staff other than direct reports.

3. Departmental annual goals and metrics are published in standard template format on the plant department website.

4. Institute an "open door" policy and encourage frequent and open communication.

Naturally this is a brief example for this publication. However, for our purposes, this is enough to demonstrate measurement and management of culture and associated values.

THE BASELINE

Any system of measurement requires an initial baseline measurement (starting point). It also requires a closed system of feedback so that adjustments and additions are made to the routines, actions, and examples based on measurements received.

To create the initial baseline (and then subsequent measurement cycles), we use surveys based primarily on our management system. The measurements should be taken semiannually and anonymously, as job security cannot be perceived to be linked to the survey.

Example survey questions might look like this, using a 1-5 scale where 5 is the best and 1 is the worst:

• Do you believe the department demonstrates transparency and has a program of communications that encourages transparency?

• Do your department heads report to you and your colleagues routinely in an open and clear way?

• Do managers discuss departmental matters with your informally and openly?

• Are you provided access to all departmental goals, targets, initiatives, and metrics?

• Do you feel able to communicate with your manager openly, often, and at your request? Is your manager easily accessible?

One of the secrets of this type of cultural management program is the "example" portion of the Routines, Actions, and Examples. It is critical that managers in particular demonstrate by example the behaviors that embody the desired value. This begins the institutionalizing of the culture.

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