

A WEEK IN *Learning*

Understanding & Developing Organizational Culture

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“You are what you eat” is a familiar mantra almost everyone has heard. At a young age, we are told to abandon fatty foods and sugary sodas, for a more balanced diet that is rich in nutrients and whole foods. The reason? In order to grow into the happy, healthy adults we ought to be, we have to begin by eating right. Thus, we begin the slow process of change. Some of us dip our toe into the change by replacing the mid-day snickers bar with a piece of fruit. Others may jump in with both feet and begin following a regimented diet, where counting calories, monitoring portions, and eliminating entire food groups represents the wholesale change you embrace in order to get to the results you are looking for.

What if I told you that organizations are no different? Sure, an organization won't get indigestion when it throws back a double-double burger, fries and a coke, but they do have a similar cause-and-effect dynamic. This week's article explores how an organization can experience this type of dynamic through reactions between the culture and its' people. More specifically, we will explore how the actions we take every day *shape and redefine* our organizational culture.

To begin, let's agree that there are many ways to define 'organizational culture'.

For our purpose, we will use a very basic description: *An organization's culture defines the proper way to behave within the organization. This culture consists of shared beliefs and values established by leaders, and then communicated and reinforced through various methods, ultimately shaping employee perceptions, behaviors and understanding. Organizational culture sets the context for everything an enterprise does.*

When you joined GCNA, you experienced a point-in-time snapshot of its' organizational culture. The Trust Pledge placard on the wall represented an artifact that told you this is how people behave at GCNA. At New Hire Orientation, GCNA leaders related their personal story about why they are here and what they value. This served as another artifact, which told you that these were the shared beliefs and values GCNA team members shared. Attending the Mission Tour, you learned how we convert donated goods into revenue in order to help fund our mission to end poverty, which signified another artifact that told you how this organization works together to serve its' mission.

Each of these point-in-time experiences provided you with bits of information that you, consciously or sub-consciously, started to link to one another, creating your overall impression of GCNA's organizational culture. These experiences and artifacts are designed intentionally to form the basis of, and to communicate, the essence of our GCNA culture. What we know less about, and what happens somewhat organically, are the experiences



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Organizational Culture

and artifacts that team members encounter every day. These daily experiences are just as, if not more, important to building and maintaining a healthy organizational culture. Okay, you might be thinking: *what the heck should I do with this information?*

Here is what I would like every leader to think about: a strong culture is a common denominator among the most successful companies. All have consensus at the top regarding cultural priorities and behavioral norms. Leaders in successful companies live their cultures every day and go out of their way to help and serve others. Conversely, an ineffective culture can bring down the organization and its leadership. Disengaged employees, high turnover, poor customer relations, and lower profits are examples of how the wrong culture can negatively impact the bottom line.

Here are three ways we can design and develop our own organizational culture through leadership:

1. **Lead by example** – Recognize that your behaviors are constantly influencing, shaping, and re-defining the organizational culture around you. When your behaviors line up with organizational artifacts, such as the Core Values and Trust Pledge, your people notice. When your behaviors *don't* line up, your people become confused. If we present our teams with conflicting messages, their personal experience with culture begins to reshape their past perception of culture. As Aristotle once said, “We are what we repeatedly do.” What you do and how you do it, matters.
2. **Offer incentives** – People respond to rewards and recognition (both monetary and non-monetary). Every time a behavior is rewarded, or not rewarded, you are sending a direct message. One successful businessman said, “Show me the incentive and I will show you the outcome.” What you do and how you do it, matters.
3. **Check your filter** – Pay attention to how your actions are affecting the thoughts and behaviors of your team. Are you promoting a singular “right” way of thinking and behaving? Do your actions penalize alternative viewpoints and behaviors? As leaders, we must strive to create an environment that welcomes diversity of thought. As Malcolm Forbes once said, “Diversity: the art of thinking independently together.” What you do and how you do it, matters.

Whether you realize it or not, each of you has a hand in shaping and building GCNA’s organizational culture. Every interaction you have with a team member or peer. Every email you send. Every word uttered, or not uttered, is contributing to our culture. To look solely at our placards without looking at ourselves in the mirror is equivalent to saying, “*I believe in the importance of eating a balanced diet, rich in nutrients and whole foods.*”, but then secretly going to In-n-Out to eat a double-double, fries, and a coke in the parking lot. As leaders, we must continually feed and provide our organization’s culture with experiences that are aligned with the artifacts being presented, and this begins with taking ownership of our own leadership behaviors.

Remember: what you do and how you do it, *matters*.

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