

What is the culture like at your workplace? And in the law firms your organization most closely works with? And does it matter anyway?

Different people in the same organization sometimes have quite different perceptions about “their” organizational

Organizational Culture

BY RONALD F. POL

culture, yet culture can have a considerable impact on the success, and sometimes even viability, of any business.

For example, physical failures led directly to the destruction of the space shuttle *Columbia*, yet the investigation identified organizational and cultural weaknesses that paved the way to catastrophic failure.¹

Strategy and Culture

Organizations often craft brilliant strategic plans, only to have them fall flat during the implementation phase. The reason, all too often, is simple: The strategy is not supported, and may actually be sabotaged, by the organizational culture. Culture, it turns out, is a critically powerful element in the process of strategy implementation and change management.

Culture defines how people work together and interact with each other. It determines what is rewarded, merely tolerated, and actively discouraged. Yet, despite general acknowledgement of the core strategic importance of culture, when lawyers are asked to describe their culture, they almost inevitably revert to euphemisms such as: “*Collegial*” “*democratic*” “*respectful*.” I recently presented the following hypothetical to a partner with a 200+

lawyer firm. “Partner X earns twice as much as any other partner and operates a huge team. It’s a widely-known ‘secret’ that (married) X is conducting an affair with one of X’s team members in breach of the firm’s policies, and that the team has the largest attrition rate of any group of lawyers in the firm. The partner is almost universally considered

‘a great lawyer but impossible to work with; you’re thrown in the deep end, there’s no mentoring

or even supervision, but get anything wrong and you’re out.’ Like any blue-chip firm, it has first-rate policies and brochures about its great workplace, quality supervision, and training programs. What, if anything, would your firm do in this situation?”

The response was simple. “Nothing. What’s the problem?”

Delving deeper, I asked whether there was any possibility that the firm might seek to demonstrate to X the impact of high staff attrition, coach X to help build more effective supervision and mentoring skills, explain the importance of the firm’s policies and their consistent application, and if this was refused or failed after a reasonable time, possibly even fire X?

An equally emphatic “No chance. We’d never fire a partner who was earning that much money.”

For the partner of one large firm at least, their real culture seems largely defined by money. Yet this is not the culture which the firm asserts and describes to its staff and clients. Ironically, if the firm chose to align its expressed culture with strategies designed accordingly, it might make more money, be a better place to work, and reflect this in the value delivered to its clients.

Cultural Inventory

A cultural inventory is a tool that helps provide a meaningful measure of an organization’s culture according to key “bottom line” criteria, which impact directly on organizational success. Typically, it will probe key indicators relating to empowerment, team orientation, capability development, core values, customer focus, organizational learning, and more.

A cultural inventory provides a powerful and easily understood description of organizational culture and a foundation to align it with strategy across a range of areas, such as enhancing diversity programs, interoffice standards, and motivated legal teams. It can particularly help identify opportunities to improve working relationships, internally and with key providers such as law firms.

Clients and Their Law Firms

The close relationship between organizational clients and their main law firms suggests that a good cultural fit will result in improved collaboration, and better, more cost-effective results for their joint client. Not to mention, it benefits the organization internally, which results in a winning situation for all parties involved.

The author thanks Robert Millard and Edge International, who shared insights about the Edge International Cultural Inventory, based on extensive academic research and adapted specifically for lawyers. For more information visit www.edge.ai. ■

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NOTE

1. Outlined earlier, in *Compliance and the Effect of Organisational Culture*, ACC Docket, Nov/Dec 2005.



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