INTRODUCTION

This Culture Change overview is intended for use by School/Unit leaders and managers across Harvard, as well as EOE consultants and HR partners. The toolkit is designed to help leaders better understand their organizational culture, identify elements that they’d like to change, and develop a strategy for fostering that cultural shift. In alignment with the University-wide ‘Embracing Change’ competency, this kit is a resource to help you guide, lead and manage culture change effectively with special attention to the challenges we face as a result of the pandemic.

UNDERSTAND YOUR CULTURE

Leaders may have an innate awareness that culture is a key element of organizational success, but they may not understand how to describe or change it. They may say their culture is 'good' if their employees seem happy, or 'bad' if they see attrition and conflict. It may be difficult for a leader to describe the elements that create culture and parsing its components can be challenging.

At this moment of national crisis, culture change may be needed to respond to and reinforce new workplace norms and combat reactivity. If an organization aspires to be resilient and creative while their staff is dispersed and facing an unprecedented level of stress, culture change becomes critical. Leaders need to define and model the culture they aspire to create, even in this difficult time.

Culture can be understood as the ‘way things are done’ in your organization. There are many different definitions of culture which help us to understand what sometimes feels difficult to describe. In “The Leader’s Guide to Corporate Culture,” Boris Groysberg, Jeremiah Lee, Jesse Price and J. Yo-Jud Cheng, synthesize the breadth of theories about culture into several themes:

- **Culture reflects the collective experience.** It does not depend on one leader or a management team. It is reflected in the group’s behaviors, values, and assumptions. Often culture is implicit rather than clearly documented.
- **Culture is ubiquitous.** It is reflected in group norms, office environments, stories and rituals.
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- **Culture is lasting.** As culture reflects a shared experience, a culture doesn’t immediately shift with the arrival or departure of a leader or team. Organizational culture is reflected in the recruitment and retention over time of those who “fit” into the culture. Employees that do not fit with the culture are more likely to leave. Culture reinforces itself as a collective pattern.

**ANALYZE YOUR CULTURE**

In *Organizational Culture in Action* (2011) Driskill and Brenton suggest that leaders ask themselves the following questions to better understand their own workplace culture. Leadership should apply the lens of the current work environment to understand the realities of their culture.

- What is it like to work in this organization?
- What types of individuals are considered “high potential” and why?
- What types of in person events has your department sponsored for employees? What kind of virtual events have been created since the onset of the pandemic?
- What does a new employee need to learn to fit in?
- What type of individual would not be happy working here and why?
- What is a story that illustrates your organization at its best? Worst?
- How strong is your culture? In strong cultures, values permeate all levels of the organization and all aspects of its functioning. In weak cultures, you may be pressed to even identify common values.

**IDENTIFY OPPORTUNITIES FOR CULTURE CHANGE**

Before beginning a culture change effort, a leader must identify, articulate and own the need for change, and commit to drive the process forward.
• What aspects of the culture are working and need to be preserved?
• What aspects of your culture do you believe need to shift?
• What is inhibiting growth?
• What may be causing attrition or disengagement?
• What is causing consistent conflict or challenges?

In the article “Cultural Change That Sticks,” Jon R. Katzenbach, Ilona Steffen and Caroline Kronley outline steps in the culture change process. The list below draws from their work. By following each step in the process, you can ensure that culture change is well integrated and reinforced within your organization.

**Step 1: MATCH STRATEGY AND CULTURE**

“*Culture eats strategy for breakfast.*”

- *Organizational Theorist and Management Consultant, Peter Drucker*

Leaders often underestimate the extent to which the effectiveness of strategy depends on cultural alignment. For example, a leader may propose a strategy to create efficiencies, but if their team communication is unstructured and inefficient, it will likely be difficult to reach their goals.

The key is to closely align your strategic objectives with the culture you aspire to create. Identify which desired behaviors will support the mission, vision and objectives of your organization and plan to reinforce them through specific goals. A move to a dispersed working environment may not completely align with a strategy that is focused on in-person service delivery. Consider how you may reframe your strategic objectives to better reflect the realistic goals for a dispersed working environment.
Use the following questions as a guide to prepare a draft written plan for moving forward.

- Review your strategic plan* and annual goals. How well do your mission, vision and strategic objectives align with your desired cultural change(s)?
- How well do you think your staff has embraced and internalized your strategy?
- Where do the gaps in understanding lie? Which goals are consistently unmet or overlooked?
- How can the changes you would like to make in your culture reinforce your organizational strategy?
- Are any of the gaps in your organization’s ability to execute strategic goals addressable through a change in culture?
- Finally, articulate the vision and business case, and define a limited set of quantifiable targets with clear milestones and links to the strategy.

*See CWD’s Strategic Planning Toolkit for more information on creating a strategic plan.

**Step 2: FOCUS ON CRITICAL BEHAVIORAL SHIFTS**

In their book, *Switch: How to Make Change When Change is Hard*, authors Chip Heath and Dan Heath draw from theories about change and behavior to illustrate the importance of task clarity as well as the need to appeal to both emotional needs and rational thinking.

“Change begins at the level of individual decisions and behaviors, but that's a hard place to start because that's where the friction is. Inertia and decision paralysis will conspire to keep people doing things the old way. To spark movement in a new direction, you need to provide crystal-clear guidance.”

Here are additional concrete steps in the process:

- Reflect on the desired culture change you articulated in Step 1. How would people act if their behavior supported your objectives? Conduct listening sessions with people at all different levels throughout your organization to learn what behaviors are most affected by the current culture—both positively and negatively. Help them uncover how the pandemic reality impacted their behaviors both positively and negatively.
- Share the data from the sessions with your leadership team and gain their insights:
  - Which behaviors support the culture change?
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- Which would work against it?
- What different behaviors would leaders, managers and employees exhibit?
- How could employees ideate and iterate on existing processes to align with culture change?
- How would they raise concerns or challenges?

- Synthesize the listening session data and the themes from leadership conversations to reflect on and solidify behaviors critical to your change effort.
- Translate those critical behaviors into simple, practical steps that people can take every day, and that you can refer to clearly in verbal and written communications.
- Create a baseline survey to assess progress on key culture change criteria.

Step 3: FIND AND REPLICATE EXISTING BEHAVIORS

In the book *The Power of Positive Deviance*, Jerry Sternin, Monique Sternin, and Ricardo Pascale emphasize the importance of finding opportunities to reinforce what is working toward your goal before taking on the challenge of changing what isn’t.

Their concept of Positive Deviance assumes that at least one person in a community or organization, already exhibits the desired behavior. While the behavior you aim to change in your culture may be new to many on your team, look for examples of individuals who already exhibit the change you want to see, observe the behavior, and amplify it.

- What are they doing differently, even though they have the same resources as others? They may have adopted or created their own system or unique approach to the challenge you are seeking to address.
- What are the steps the individual is taking in their unique solution to the problem?
- How does the individual describe the how and why of their unique behavior? Let their answers inform your strategy for spreading those practice or practices to others.
Step 4: FORMAL AND INFORMAL INTERVENTIONS

Implement both formal and informal interventions to reinforce the new behaviors. Formal interventions could include new rules, metrics, expectations and rewards to create accountability around the new behaviors. Consider how to reinforce change through public dialogue such as messaging in virtual town hall or private channels such as mentoring programs. Articulate the strategic purpose for those changes, including what successful culture change could look like and the part each individual will need to play in making the change happen. New behaviors should be also communicated through informal channels in ways that help drive both rational and emotional motivation for change.

Consider best practice when organizing virtual events. Rather than long sessions with larger groups that you might host on campus, zoom meetings can be smaller, scheduled for shorter time slots and repeated to reinforce impact and reduce burnout.

The following are some examples of possible interventions to reinforce desired cultural changes*:

- Enlist change champions from across the school or unit to create a cross-functional team of influencers and decision-makers who will focus on and shape change efforts. Convene change champions regularly to coordinate related actions.
- Communication is critical during any change process. Plan and deliver frequent updates to reinforce messaging and set clear accountability for behavior change across the organization.**
- Recognize and reward those who exhibit culturally reinforcing behaviors.
- Create mentorship programs to reinforce new cultural values/philosophy/tools/processes.
- Train managers to help those who are resisting the change.
- Redesign recruitment practices to help find candidates who would best “fit” the new culture.

*See CWD’s Change Leadership Toolkit for more information on how to approach and execute a large change effort.
Culture change should be measured to gauge and reflect progress. Repeat the survey from Step 2 twice annually to determine development around culture change objectives. Consider the following questions in your evaluation efforts:

- How has this process impacted productivity? Is your organization meeting priorities and adhering to deadlines? Are you meeting the intended goals?
- Are you seeing critical behaviors in place across the organization? Develop additional criteria for assessing behavior change and reinforcing positive developments. Ask your leaders and managers to evaluate their own teams: are they seeing the few behaviors that matter most?
- Assess employee mindset regarding change. What do the employees feel and believe about the change? Does the data indicate positive attitudes around this effort and how much resistance is there to the effort?

### ADDITIONAL SUGGESTED ARTICLES

- *Changing Company Culture Requires a Movement, Not a Mandate* Walker and Sarah A. Soule
- *3 Ways to Create a Necessary Culture Shift Amid COVID-19* Gallup
- *3 Ways to Create a Work Culture that Brings out the Best in Employees* Chris White
- *Making the Emotional Case for Change: An Interview with Chip Heath* McKinsey