

Workplace Assessment: Employee and Leadership Engagement – Culture Conversation:

Overview

In Washington State, we are transforming our work environment to align with how people do their best work. As part of this transformation, we are engaging employees and leaders to talk about culture and our part as owners and nurturers. This includes assessing the culture we are part of, our perceptions of that culture, and what an ideal culture might look like that supports our best work.

Why should you care? Culture is often challenging for an organization to articulate, but its impact is far reaching and influences management, process, products, employee engagement, employee attraction and retention, productivity, customer service, and ultimately the bottom line. Organizational culture is a huge part of the work environment, intentionally or unintentionally.

Definition of Culture

So, what is organizational culture? Culture is the system of values, behaviors, and beliefs that influences how people work within an organization or in simple terms - the way the place runs.

Organizational culture includes an organization's expectations, experiences, philosophy and values. Culture is expressed in the organization's self-image, inner workings, interactions with the outside world, and future expectations. It affects everything:

- (1) the ways the organization conducts its business, treats its employees, customers, and the wider community,*
- (2) the extent to which freedom is allowed in decision making, developing new ideas, and personal expression,*
- (3) how power and information flow through its hierarchy, and*
- (4) how committed employees are towards collective objectives.*

Purpose

This document is a tool to assist agencies in employee engagement, during interviews or focus group sessions, to define the current state of the organization and envision a shared inspired future state. Understanding who they are as an organization, defining whom they want to become, and then

identifying the gaps from current state to the future state will help agencies plan for and implement a modern work environment. The results will assist in defining what attributes, behaviors and tasks needed to foster a defined future state.

How to conduct

Below are example exercises to facilitate culture conversations during focus groups and/or leadership interviews. Set the tone of the exercise by grounding folks in why the conversation about culture is important and how it pertains to the modern work environment. Be sure to define culture or better yet, ask the group to define culture in a few words. Please note these conversations can be hard to facilitate and create tension. Providing safe and open space for participants to be their authentic selves during the conversation is pertinent. Your Human Resource or Lean Office may be a good resource to help prepare for or even facilitate this exercise. The outcome of the exercise is a culture statement that represents the future state that the team will work toward.

Assignment

Engage with employees across the organization to understand the culture. There is always the overall culture of an agency and then the micro cultures underneath. This exercise should be scaled depending on who the conversation is with. Be sure to have a solid cross-section of employees and encourage discussion through individual and/or group exercises. You may not need answers to all the questions below. These are conversations starters to help guide folks toward a culture summary statement.

Consider providing these questions ahead of time and provide an opportunity for answers to be submitted via email. This will allow for maximum engagement. Invite the manager of the group to act in an observer role. Please note this could put the manager in a vulnerable position depending on the stage (defined below) of the culture.

Exercise One – Current state:

Consider your perception of your current culture and respond to the following questions:

- *What is your ‘WHY’ and how does the team carry it forward?*
- *What are the current social norms, and protocols in the office?*
- *What would you tell a friend about your organization if they were about to start working there?*
- *What is the one thing you would most like to change about the team?*
- *What is your favorite characteristic that is present in the team?*
- *What interaction between employees do you see? During the interaction, are emotions being expressed?*
- *What are the objects and artifacts that sit on desks, bulletin boards and hang on walls?*
- *What stage is your current culture (adopted from Tribal Leadership)?*

- *Stage 1: People are hostile—they may create scandals, steal, or even threaten violence.*
- *Stage 2: People do the minimum amount of work to get by and do not show initiative. A workplace where the language used is “my life sucks.”*
- *Stage 3: People are competitive and work to establish that they are smarter and better than anyone else is. A workplace where the language is “I’m great” and they are thinking, “And you’re not.”*
- *Stage 4: Teams are the norm and true partnership is the structure. A workplace where the language is “we’re great.”*
- *Stage 5: People focus on realizing potential by making history. These teams are innovations, leading their industries. A workplace where the language is “life is great.”*

Exercise Two – Future state:

- *What type of culture do you want to create in the future for the team?*
- *What stage of culture (from above) would you like to see your team?*
- *What behaviors do you need to establish in order to create the future culture? Examples include: flexible, engaged, innovative, collaborative, trustworthy, fun, curious, customer-focused, team-focused, passionate, transparent, change agents, accountable, nimble, resilient etc.*
- *What tools and attributes do you need in your physical space to support the desired behaviors?*

Leadership questions to drive future vision

Interview leaders of the business units to understand the specific cultures of each unit from the leadership’s perception. You can use the same questions above or a subset added with those below.

Consider your perception of your current culture and respond to the following questions:

- *What are your agency/program’s values?*
- *What behaviors do you observe when the team is at its’ best?*
- *What behaviors do you observe and shake your head and say, “what are they thinking?” Behaviors that need to stop.*
- *In two/five/ten years, what will your agency/program look like?*
- *What gets you out of bed in the morning and excited to come to work? Has this changed over time?*
- *If your agency/program dissolved tomorrow, what elements would you miss the most?*
- *If your agency/program were a person, what would your personality be like?*
- *What traits do you want all new hires to embody?*

- When a new hire starts, how do you describe your culture to them?
- What do you want your employees to be saying about you as leaders and as an agency/program?

Interactive tools

Below is an example that can be used during an exercise with leadership or staff to help define current state and future state cultures. This can be done before the conversation part. The list should be modified with any words that generally represent the team and will help drive the conversation. Consider using ideal behaviors identified by leadership during the future culture conversations when using this tool with staff. This is a quick “gut reaction” process. You can use a marker board or a large print out of these words on a spectrum. First, have employees put a mark somewhere (use different a color for the manager such as red and blue for direct reports) between the words that would best describe behaviors of the current culture. After all marks have been placed then use a different color and place where they want the future culture to be.

Once complete, identify the themes and use the results to see if the words are truly representative of the culture and desired culture. Draft a culture statement to represent both.

