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# How to Use Your Organizational Culture as a Competitive Tool

Use these tips to harness a powerful management resource.

BY MARK ANDREW MITCHELL & DONALD YATES

**Y**our organizational culture—the set of values, beliefs, and understandings shared by your organization’s employees—is one of your most powerful tools. But the same values and beliefs that can mobilize the organization to action can be a liability if they’re inconsistent with the organization’s needs.

Here are tips to assure that your culture furthers your organization’s goals:

**1 Check whether your culture is strong or weak.** Employees—potential and current, paid and volunteer—infer your culture by observing rites, ceremonies, and the physical setting of the work area and by interpreting legends, stories, symbols, and artifacts. You have a strong culture if employees agree on these internalized values. Your culture is weak if there is lack of such agreement.

The stronger your culture, the more cohesive and effective the work group. Thus, a strong culture is a tool to reinforce your organization’s strategies. A weak culture, on the other hand, can hold you back from achieving your objectives.

A simple survey is a good way to check the strength of your organization’s culture. If you determine that your culture is strong, you can work on consciously using that culture to motivate and recruit employees. If your culture is weak, you will need to put effort into bringing employees’ beliefs into agreement.

**2 Evaluate how compatible** your culture is with your organization’s objectives. Again, you might use a simple survey or focus group to determine volunteer and paid employees’ values and beliefs. Compare them to the values and beliefs underlying your organization’s culture. Address any discrepancies between the two.

**3 Focus your recruiting efforts** on volunteers and paid employees whose value systems are compatible with your organizational culture. Since you probably can’t compete with for-profit companies when it comes to monetary incentives, and volunteers have a wide variety of options competing for their volunteer time, your culture is one of your best recruiting tools. Volunteers and paid employees are most likely to join your organization if doing so will further their own personal values. Determine what benefits (intrinsic and extrinsic) a given position offers, and then seek a target market of people who desire those benefits.

*Make sure people know your mission by heart.*

*Hold ceremonies as often as possible.*

**4 Promote a culture of personal growth.** Most volunteers want positions that (a) permit self-expression, (b) provide opportunities to develop abilities, (c) present challenges, and (d) permit the visibility of achievements. Thus, your recruiting efforts will be most successful if your culture fosters self-expression, personal development, and visible recognition of achievement.

**5 Stress your mission.** The best way to strengthen your culture is to make sure people know your mission by heart and are committed to it. If each employee, paid and volunteer, feels a personal commitment to your mission, a sense of common identity and understanding will follow.

**6 Use your culture as a stabilizing force.** Trust is of paramount importance in maintaining a balanced partnership between paid staff and volunteers. To assure stable relationships, be sure your culture includes an atmosphere of great individual trust and an equitable distribution of power.

**7 Create a balance between an efficient and effective culture.** A culture that promotes efficiency may not lend itself to organizational effectiveness. Productive use of resources (efficiency) doesn't necessarily lead to success in satisfying clients' needs (effectiveness). Thus, you must balance the trade-offs between cultural values and beliefs that promote efficient and effective performance. The greater your organization's dependence on outside resources, the greater the potential for goal conflict. The more self-sufficient your organization, the stronger your culture is likely to be.

**8 Manage your culture.** Be sure you have a well-defined statement of philosophy and that your culture supports that philosophy. If you don't manage your culture, it will evolve on its own, and you'll lose control of one of your best tools.

**9 Structure the orientation process** used with new volunteers and paid employees so as to reinforce the desired organizational culture.

**10 Plan ceremonial activities** to provide public recognition for employee achievement while reinforcing the desired organizational culture. Such ceremonies are much more important to the relatively low-paid employees and unpaid volunteers in the nonprofit sector than to more economically-oriented for-profit workers. Thus, you should hold such rites and rituals as often as possible.

**11 Maintain some sort of feedback mechanism** to check that volunteers and paid employees continue to feel motivated and in tune with your underlying culture.

**12 Analyze the cultures of other nonprofit organizations** before committing to inter-organizational projects. Recognize that conflict may result when working with organizations possessing incompatible cultures. If possible, avoid undertaking projects with organizations with vastly divergent cultures. ■

#### References

- Lauer, Larry, "Using Your Organization's Culture to Build Productivity and Reputation," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 11, No. 6.
- Mitchell, Mark & Donald Yates, "How to Attract the Best Volunteers," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 14, No. 4.
- Temme, Jim, "How's the Weather in Your Organization? Determining Your Organization's Climate," *Personnel and Human Resource Development, Leadership Series*.

These resources are available from the Society's Resource Center, [www.snpo.org](http://www.snpo.org).

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