

What Your Organization Hasn't Told You

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Do you understand what goes on in your organization? Do you know what people think and feel about their work and their relationships with you and their teammates?

On the surface, you might immediately answer, "Sure, I do. I'm deeply involved in the day-to-day operations, and people talk with me all the time. We talk about problems and about plans for projects that are coming up. They even tell me some things about their families and hobbies. Yeah, I think people are pretty open with me."

Are there things you don't know about what goes on in your organization?

You might answer, "Of course I don't know everything that goes on. I don't know the private conversations that people have. I don't know for sure how loyal people are to each other and to what we're trying to accomplish here. I probably don't know some of the incidents of poor quality or some of the real reasons why a few of our best people have left."

Let me ask you to consider an analogy. Think about your own body. How much do you know and not know about the health of your body? You might start out similarly. "I know a lot about my body. I know how much I weigh. I know I feel pretty good for someone my age. Sure, I feel a little stiff now and then. I may not be as spry as I once was, and I may not have the stamina I once did, but..."

Okay, let me stop you. When you go to your doctor for a physical exam, you learn a lot about your health that you don't routinely measure. The doctor takes a sample of your blood and you learn about levels of iron and potassium and cholesterol—things you probably never even think about. And the doctor checks your reflexes, then pokes and prods and you wonder, "What's that supposed to do? Ooh, that hurts. I wonder what that means."

Sometimes those annual checkups find something that you didn't know existed. You learn that what you don't know can hurt you. So you take action to address the situation when it's small, expecting that you'll prevent some bigger crisis later.

So it is with an organizational health assessment. You don't always know what's going on in your organization. And you can't always measure it scientifically like you can the components of your blood. But you can find out things you didn't know, and you can take action that will make good things better and may prevent harmful situations from growing into major disasters.

Let's say you wanted to conduct an organizational health assessment. What kinds of things would you want to learn about your organization? Here are some possibilities.

How well do the people in your organization understand the results of their combined efforts? Do they know how the current results compare to historical results? Are they aware of the expected outcomes of the initiatives that were recently introduced?

Do folks have an appreciation for the health of the processes by which your company functions? Do they understand the negative ramifications of taking short-cuts or accepting poor quality? Are they aware of how improvements can occur, and are they actually offering suggestions for product upgrades and for enhancing productivity, reliability, and quality?

What about their impressions of what it's like to work in your organization? Do they respect and support their teammates? Would they be excited (or would they be embarrassed) to have their family members and closest friends observe them at work?

Do they ever think about how your organization's products and services compare with your competitors? Do they care? Do they realize that your customers are real human beings who welcome the benefit of their work? Do they do their work as if someone else's satisfaction depends on it?

How do they feel about the leadership in your organization? Do they openly and routinely communicate with their bosses, or do they avoid the boss as much as possible? Do they admire the boss as a role model, or is there an underlying resentment toward authority?

You probably won't know the answers to these questions until you ask. Unfortunately, many people will tell you what they think you want to hear, even if you designate someone to ask for you. Fortunately, there are skilled outsiders who can conduct periodic organizational health surveys for you, just like a skilled physician conducts your annual physical exam.

Once you know what's going on in your organization, you can make decisions about how to move in the direction of a more robust culture!