

Why Isn't "Culture" a Bigger Deal to You?

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Maybe your awareness of the importance of "culture" is already high. Maybe you work tirelessly to enhance your organization's culture. If so, please pass this article to someone who can use it.

I just know that many leaders don't understand culture. They don't value it. They don't know how to improve it. And they can't comprehend how working on "culture" will contribute anything worthwhile.

Some of you think of culture as attending art shows, concerts, and plays. Some may remember your seventh grade social studies class, where you studied the culture (the political, religious, and social structure) of ancient and foreign civilizations.

Maybe you've heard that word applied to organizations, too. Perhaps you've thought you might do some research and find out whether and how to modify your organization's culture. You've never followed through, however, because you're not sure anything beneficial would come of it.

Well, I suggest you kick "investigate culture" to a higher priority on your to-do list. Let me offer some help. Look up www.fastcompany.com, and search for "Culture Eats Strategy for Lunch" by Shawn Parr. And pick up a copy of Patrick Lencioni's latest book, *The Advantage: Why Organizational Health Trumps Everything Else in Business*.

Shawn Parr's article gives a great explanation of what organizational culture is and how it affects the daily activities of you and your colleagues. I won't recreate his description here. Let me just say that "the way we do things around here" is the common, informal portrayal. Every new employee "learns the ropes" so as not to be a disruption to his or her coworkers, but to fit in with what already exists.

Patrick Lencioni, a credible author with eight previous books to his credit, has put the "culture" news on the front page. "Organizational health [a synonym of culture] trumps everything in business."

Why is it, then, that so few leaders pay attention to culture? Lencioni thinks it's because:

- culture, and especially any improvement in culture, is hard to measure. Many leaders have a fascination with measuring things, despite Albert Einstein's observation that "Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts." Culture clearly is real and tangible, but it's certainly hard to quantify.
- working on culture rarely yields immediate improvement. In today's results-oriented environment, leaders tend to seek a rapid return on their investment of time, money, or energy. A satisfying adrenaline rush comes from solving the next urgent problem.
- working on culture doesn't seem as sophisticated as working on marketing, finance, or technology. Culture seems to involve things like common sense, courtesy, and commitment. Anybody can work on those things. Many leaders think that they should work in areas that require elaborate intelligence, such as conducting a scenario analysis of two different opportunities.

Lencioni challenges those leaders who subconsciously think that working to enhance their organization's culture is beneath them. The majority of the book gives guidance for how the key leaders can cultivate a healthy organization. We'll look at those suggestions in my next article.

In your study of culture, I invite you to look at my previously published articles on the topic. Go to my website, www.buildingfutureleaders.com, and click on "Article Archives." Put the word "culture" in the search box at the top of the page and look at what pops up.

Like fish swimming in water, your team members live daily in your organization's culture. If the environment is unhealthy, you can't expect productive performance. Pause and evaluate! Educate yourself through the resources I've offered. Then commit yourself to intentional improvement.