

A COACH'S GUIDE TO COMPANY CULTURE

An organization's culture is not usually uniformly expressed or experienced. Significant unit variations in this regard are often conveyed by way of group norms, all of which are necessary for leaders to decipher and understand. Awareness with respect to appreciating the impact of company culture can be invaluable whether helping the leader navigate resistance to culture change or in shaping the culture into an asset that regularly contributes to successful business performance.

Clues about culture can be found in many forms, such as, stated organizational priorities, procedural norms and processes, role titles and definitions, performance expectations, and company values. Views and practices about diversity, equity, inclusion, and access are central aspects of culture. Company etiquette, how meetings are run, and repeated messages about "how we do things around here" are also key components of an organization's culture.

Seemingly benign, subjective, or random factors also contribute to a system's cultural infrastructure. For example, company traditions, stories about its history and origins and revered organizational heroes often hold robust information about tacit expectations for an organization's leaders and its employees? Furthermore, company branding, preferred images and logos, accepted metaphors, unique expressions and acronyms – even jokes – add to a company's cultural profile. Taken together, culture is embedded in explicit statements and behaviors as well as in implicit (unstated, informal) expectations and standards, all having wide ranging effects on "the business" and on its people.

While the primary focus for executive coaching work is the immediate performance of an individual leader, it is important to consider the broader organizational norms operating in the system. These forces are not easily defined or measured but they are powerful, and clearly experienced by employees at all levels of the organization. Effectiveness in general, and perhaps

executive performance in particular, is often judged by expectations hidden within the company's norms, its "culture."

For example, "cultural awareness" provides context for interpreting feedback gathered about a client during stakeholder interviews or via other methods by shedding light on how a leader's intentions are being interpreted and whether their actions are deemed acceptable and welcomed. Furthermore, organizational norms may determine how a leader can best introduce change, and how resistance to this change can be effectively managed or not. In addition, company culture plays a strong role in creating and shaping levels of trust around a leader especially when there is ongoing change and/or a high degree of uncertainty and unpredictability in an organization.

Strategies for Sizing up Company Culture:

- Do a basic internet search. What has been in the news about the company and your client? How is the news different than what you have learned from others directly? Use a news posting service (e.g., Google Alerts or Yahoo Finance) to sign up for regular updates about your client and the company. On the company website, you may also be able to sign up to receive press releases.
- Obtain an information packet from Investor Relations, for example, and access multiple years of the Annual Report. How does the performance picture of the company get portrayed? Look at the photos in the Annual Reports -- what images or messages get reinforced from one year to the next? Visit the company website. What key information is placed "up front" or gets repeated as you move from one page to the next? How is the corporate image portrayed on the website and is it the same or different from other media about the company?

www.executivecoachingroundtable.com

A COACH'S GUIDE TO COMPANY CULTURE

- Gather any available information about the company's culture, such as its core values, code of ethics, and statements on DEIA for example. If you were being hired or recruited, what would be your impression of these? Related to this, consider talking with your client about their initial onboarding process and whether or not their current experience is consistent with their initial impressions and expectations. Might there be any unspoken norms and values?
- How is the company positioned on social media? What are the organization's expectations and guidance about the use of social media?
- Ask your client: "What are stories everyone has heard related to the founders and history of the organization?"
- Ask your client to describe the top management team and the CEO (if not your client). Are there any special stories that get told about members of the top group (e.g., how they got the job, who wanted them to get the job, what job they want next)? What would employees say are the two or three most valued attributes of the company's successful leaders.
- Ask basic questions about the company and its performance. What information seems readily available? What content is not in general circulation? What do the accessible resources suggest about the information that is weighing on the minds of executives when making decisions, especially during uncertain times?
- How does your client understand and describe their company's business model? How does this business model differ from competitors' models? What is the company's value proposition? How does the company remain relevant, continue to make a profit, and fulfill its mission?
- What recruitment practices does the company engage in to promote diversity? In what ways does the company and its leadership invest in equity, inclusion, and access? What is the company's policy on affinity groups and other approaches to creating a welcoming and inclusive environment for all?
- When possible, visit the client's workplace, paying close attention to the surroundings and the "feel" of the space. What are the messages being sent? Do the space and surroundings draw you in, overwhelm you, change your mood or suggest any particular values? Are these messages consistent or inconsistent with respect to the company's business model, strategic plan and stated priorities?
- Spend some time where employees gather. What do you notice? How are the areas decorated?
- What company messages – obvious or more subtle - are provided in and around these places? Who sits or congregates with whom? What might those configurations suggest?
- Find out what draws people together. What regular business or social gatherings (e.g., townhalls, award ceremonies, etc.) occur? When do they occur? What gets celebrated and what does not get celebrated? Who attends? What organizational values get highlighted as a function of these rituals/gatherings?
- How do people dress? What messages are being conveyed by clothing or other stylistic choices? How is status communicated?
- As you learn about your client and observe others in the company, learn more about the company culture from: (a) how people communicate (e.g.,

A COACH'S GUIDE TO COMPANY CULTURE

email, face to face, phone, text, virtual); (b) how people construct their messages (e.g., slang, special vocabulary, acronyms, metaphors); (c) how meetings are conducted (e.g., primarily in person, hybrid or virtually).

- Get a feel for what virtual and live meetings are like. For example, to what extent are individuals invited or encouraged to contribute to the conversations? Do they readily offer their thoughts or opinions? Who shows up and who does not?
- Pay special attention to the working conditions for employees at all levels of the company. Do staff have the resources and information they need to carry out their responsibilities and performance expectations? What is the tenor of the relationships between senior leadership and frontline employees? Talk to your client about systemic factors that can get in the way of their effectiveness? What gets in the way of other key players' effectiveness? How are these obstacles managed?
- Learn from your client about how people get promoted in the company. What are the most valued attributes and characteristics? What do they have to do? Who do they have to know? Give an example of a colleague who has done this successfully.
- What might your client say to you about the company's organizational norms if they were trying to recruit you to work there? What might they NOT say or have to think about "spinning"? What seem to be the biggest surprises new employees encounter?
- What can your client tell you about why prior senior executives have been fired or forced out of their positions? What led up to their failure? When have people "gotten in trouble" but not fired. Are

there particular behaviors or activities that are frowned upon?

- Ask your client if there was just one thing that the client could change about the company's culture, what would it be?

Readings About Organizational Culture

Barney, J. B., Amorim, M., and Julio, C. (2023). Create Stories That Change Your Company's Culture. *Harvard Business Review*, September-October.

Cameron, K.S. & Quinn, R.E. (2011). *Diagnosing and Changing Organizational Culture: Based on the Competing Values Framework*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Coyle, Daniel. (2018). *The Culture Code: The Secrets of Highly Effective Groups*. New York, NY: Bantam Books.

Denison, Daniel R. (1990). *Corporate Culture and Organizational Effectiveness*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Groysberg, B., Lee, J., Price, J., and Cheng, J.Y. (2018). Article Collection: *The Leader's Guide to Corporate Culture*. *Harvard Business Review*, January-February (reprint R1801B)

Martin, Joanne. (2001). *Organizational Culture: Mapping the Terrain*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Schein, Edgar H. (2016). *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 5th edition. New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons.