



Culture 101: How Does Culture Change Really Work?

By Jamie Notter

Culture change is easier than you think. Culture is the collection of words, actions, thoughts, and stuff that clarifies and reinforces what is truly valued in an organization.

That means culture change is ultimately about changing what is really valued. For example, let's say you do a culture assessment and realize you suffer from a very common pattern related to innovation—your culture values the concepts of innovation (creativity, future focus), but doesn't value (as much) the practices of innovation, like experimenting and taking risks. If you want innovation, you'll need those practices, so your culture change efforts will be focused on making it clear that you really value them. In other words, you want a culture where more people are willing to take risks and run experiments.

To get there, you have to intentionally make changes to the way you do things. In our culture design work, we call these "plays" for your Culture Playbook. We give clients a simple framework for mapping out their culture change plays, and the three main areas are process, structure/design, and technology. If you make intentional changes in these three areas that show people that your culture now values something different than it did before, then voilà, you have changed your culture.

"Process" is probably the biggest area where change happens. If you want to change your culture to value the practices of innovation more, then look for processes you could change that would result in that new behavior. For example, if you track metrics on a monthly or quarterly organizational dashboard (and I hope you do), add two numbers: how many experiments were run last period and what percent failed. I guarantee you if your managers are required to report those numbers, and they start putting up zeroes, they'll start to look for areas where they can experiment. A simple process change results in new behavior. That's culture change.

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It will take more than one process change for it to become embedded in the culture, of course. You may also want to deploy idea management software that enables employees to both share ideas for innovation and vote them up or down. Or you could give people more time to do innovation through an annual "innovation day" or by giving people a percentage of time to work on innovation projects (like Google's famous 20% time). There will likely be some HR-related changes, like adding innovation to your performance reviews, and you may have to stop doing some things (like getting mad in your management team meeting every time someone reports an experiment that failed). You just keep making the targeted changes until you can look around and say, yes, this culture really values the practices of innovation.

That is culture change. It's simple and accessible to people at all levels of the organization. It's not always easy, of course, but it's doable, as long as you can clearly spot the culture patterns and be disciplined about the change efforts.

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