



Organizational Culture of Cultural Organizations

By Natasha Dresner

What comes to mind when you think of the word “culture”? Music? Dance? Art? Theater? We are blessed with so many varied world class nonprofit cultural institutions here in The Berkshires that it would be easy to miss something that these institutions – and all organizations, for that matter, have in common – namely, that each of them has a unique culture all its own.

In a world (especially, a nonprofit world) of limited resources, a strong organizational culture is, perhaps, the most valuable resource and capacity-building tool an organization can have, and yet it's also one of the most overlooked. So, let's take a closer look.

The word culture comes from the Latin word *colere*, which can mean to tend, to cultivate, to foster, to promote growth. For our purposes here, it can be further defined as collective behaviors cultivated over time through social learning. In other words, it's a way of life, where certain beliefs, values, attitudes, ways of doing and saying things, and so much more are commonly (and often unconsciously) accepted and passed along.

Culture is so embedded into everything we do that it might just as well be invisible, but just because we can't see it directly doesn't mean it can't be seen at all, or that it doesn't profoundly affect how we see the world.

Those of you familiar with Ben Zender's book *The Art of Possibility* may remember the story about the two shoe salesmen traveling from England to Africa in the 1900s to see if they could sell shoes. One salesman's telegram says “Situation hopeless! They don't wear shoes here.” The other one's says “Marvelous opportunity! They don't wear shoes here!”

While personality may have something to do with it, I bet that if someone had looked at the two salesmen's cultural backgrounds, it would have explained a lot about the differences in their messages.

That difference may be fine when we're talking about two individual shoe salesmen, who have nothing to do with each other, however, when they're working for the same shoe company, you can see how that could be an enormous problem.

All organizations are created and run by individual people who bring their cultures (their beliefs and attitudes) to work with them, forming and affecting the cultures of those organizations. Despite the popular notion of separating your personal and professional lives, people don't and can't really do it – and, if they can, probably not for long. So, if people working with you share common values with each other and the organization, it will benefit the organization greatly. If not, it will put the organization at risk.

That is one reason why hiring people – both staff and board – who fit your organizational culture well, and not just the qualification requirements, is so important. Describing your culture in the job descriptions is a must. Designing clever culture-related questions will allow you to listen to and observe the candidates' answers and behaviors to connect with who they are and not just what they do.

But let me be clear, looking for people who fit your culture doesn't mean looking for yes-men and women or avoiding diversity. People can – and, often, even should – have different views and approaches. This can support innovation and benefit your organization in many ways as long as those people share common values such as respect and curiosity, and act accordingly.

Truly embracing your core values (both personal and organizational) is vital to building a healthy organizational culture. Values drive actions and behaviors, and actions and behaviors form your culture. To paraphrase “We are what we eat,” we are how we act – not what we say – because actions speak louder than words.

So, understanding how you act/ behave (or don't act/ behave) and if it's aligned with your core values is key for understanding and agreeing on behaviors your staff and board should model to each other and to the community. By constantly modeling and repeating those behaviors, you are reinforcing existing, and/or building new, positive habits so they can become second nature, which is what culture is and why it is responsible for organizational success or failure. If it's second nature for you to shout and use rude language, it doesn't matter how much you think you can control yourself in public; sooner or later, you will slip.

In addition, staff trainings and board orientations are great opportunities to review your organizational values and culture using examples of past decisions made, real

scenarios, and do's and don'ts checklists. For example, if one of your core values is generosity, you need to start being generous yourselves, rather than expecting others to be generous with you. How can you be generous? Ask people to give you feedback, instead of offering them yours; take real interest in your staff and listen to them; thank others before looking to be thanked by others; confront people that matter gently, but directly; whether you hold a paid or a volunteer position with the organization, give a meaningful financial gift (meaningful to you) in addition to your time; see the whole individual; put a good word in in the community for the organization; just smile...

A long time ago, I learned one of the organizational development mantras that *structure predicates behavior*. What it means is that, for example, if your structure at work doesn't allow for paid parental leave, you're much more likely to be less invested in your job. (Your behavior is predicated by the structure). For the topic at hand, the mantra could just as easily be *culture predicates structure*, meaning that, for example, if that organization's culture was driven by the value of "community," its structure would have had paid parental leave and, as a result, you'd be willing to go the extra mile for your organization.

This is also the reason behind the need to look at the culture of your organization holistically and systematically. We already established that culture, by definition, is a holistic phenomenon, but let's take it a step further. There is only one organizational culture, but it can have a myriad of interconnected and mutually impactful cultural aspects that go into it, which can make it healthy, unhealthy, or anything in between. These days, we are bombarded by terminology such as "culture of inquiry," "culture of accountability," "culture of philanthropy," and so on. We hear questions like "do you have a culture of transparency," and statements like "You need to build a culture of feedback." And while those are not wrong, the danger is that these questions and statements occur and are often being treated in silos. Particularly, because of the tunnel vision, reactive mode we are often in, we are often only trying to solve our most current problem or problems. Using organizational culture as an umbrella term for all of the above subcultures will change that, allowing you to examine the components together to see what they look like in action, how they interact, overlap, and support each other. For example, without asking a thoughtful or tough question, it's hard to create transparency, but knowing the question isn't the same as feeling safe asking it, and safety comes from trust, and trust comes from having a positive relationship, and a positive relationship often starts with a thoughtful question.

I hope that you see now how the success or failure of everything you and your organization are doing or trying to do can be traced back to your organizational culture. And perhaps the next time you hear the phrase cultural institution, this will be the first thing you think of!

Source: <https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/cultural-institution-not-that-one-the-other-one>