

Culture: Your Environment for People at Work

What Is Organizational Culture?

By [Susan M. Heathfield](#), About.com Guide

People in every workplace talk about organizational culture, that mysterious word that characterizes a work environment. One of the key questions and assessments, when employers interview a prospective employee, explores whether the candidate is a good "cultural fit." Culture is difficult to define, but you generally know when you have found an employee who appears to fit your culture. He just "feels" right.

Culture is the environment that surrounds you at work all of the time. Culture is a powerful element that shapes your work enjoyment, your work relationships, and your work processes. But, culture is something that you cannot actually see, except through its physical manifestations in your work place.

In many ways, culture is like personality. In a person, the personality is made up of the values, beliefs, underlying assumptions, interests, experiences, upbringing, and habits that create a person's behavior.

Culture is made up of **the values, beliefs, underlying assumptions, attitudes, and behaviors shared by a group of people**. Culture is the behavior that results when a group arrives at a set of - generally unspoken and unwritten - rules for working together.

An organization's culture is made up of all of the life experiences each employee brings to the organization. Culture is especially influenced by the organization's founder, executives, and other managerial staff because of their role in decision making and strategic direction.

Culture is represented in a group's:

- Language,
- Decision making,
- Symbols,
- Stories and legends, and
- Daily work practices.

Something as simple as the objects chosen to grace a desk tell you a lot about how employees view and participate in your organization's culture. Your bulletin board content, the company newsletter, the interaction of employees in meetings, and the way in which people collaborate, speak volumes about your organizational culture.

Central Concepts about Culture

Professors Ken Thompson (DePaul University) and Fred Luthans (University of Nebraska) highlight the following seven characteristics of culture through my interpretive lens.

- **Culture = Behavior.** Culture is a word used to describe the behaviors that represent the general operating norms in your environment. Culture is not usually defined as good or bad, although aspects of your culture likely support your progress and success and other aspects impede your progress.

A norm of accountability will help make your organization successful. A norm of spectacular customer service will sell your products and engage your employees. Tolerating poor performance or exhibiting a lack of discipline to maintain established processes and systems will impede your success.

- **Culture is Learned.** People learn to perform certain behaviors through either the rewards or negative consequences that follow their behavior. When a behavior is rewarded, it is repeated and the association eventually becomes part of the culture. A simple thank you from an executive for work performed in a particular manner, molds the culture.
- **Culture is Learned Through Interaction.** Employees learn culture by interacting with other employees. Most behaviors and rewards in organizations involve other employees. An applicant experiences a sense of your culture, and his or her fit within your culture, during the interview process. An initial opinion of your culture can be formed as early as the first phone call from the Human Resources department.
- **Sub-cultures Form Through Rewards.** Employees have many different wants and needs. Sometimes employees value rewards that are not associated with the behaviors desired by managers for the overall company. This is often how subcultures are formed, as people get social rewards from coworkers or have their most important needs met in their departments or project teams.