Culture for High Performance

Recognition of culture as an organizational opportunity

Organizational culture exists, whether by design or default, and it can impact organizational effectiveness. The purpose here is to present a framework to raise awareness and encourage dialogue across the organization on this important subject.

Part of this dialogue is to identify the cultural attribute that is most essential for long-term success and then focus attention on it. As progress is made in one area, attention can turn to another cultural attribute. This is not to minimize the necessity of being successful in all areas, but a recognition that employees cannot cope with the stress and confusion of too many changes at one time. The following observations are offered as dialogue starters.

Further corporate integration requires a **global vs. local orientation** with employees who thinks of themselves as "Company X employees" and understand their role within the larger entity. While a communication and training program might assist some employees in making this transition, it is expected that this is a longer term initiative that will also require careful recruitment and selection of new hires that fit the desired mold. Examples of how this culture might be nurtured include setting clear expectations that a new hire's career path is likely to include one or more job relocations, one of which may be in a corporate location. Integration with corporate workforce planning would further encourage bi-directional rotational assignment.

Closely associated with a global orientation are **cultural differences** that often arise. Many of these differences involve consensus building versus expeditious achievement from individual effort. Other aspects of consensus building are related to dealing with conflict. Someone seeking to avoid direct conflict is likely to favor indirect communication, which is seen as rude by a culture that favors airing differences face-to-face. A further cultural difference lies in time perception, not only how time is valued, but the degree to which scenario planning is top-of-mind in how work is approached. These differences are neither right nor wrong since different situations may benefit from different cultural approaches. However, problems do occur when such differences are in play, but not recognized. This creates a potential for misunderstanding that is often not articulated, but left to simmer as hurt feelings and erosion of trust.

Attitude toward **employee empowerment** involves trust issues that are fundamental to employee development. Aspects of **two-way trust** are also involved when moving toward more employee and supervisor control over business processes without tight control from management or corporate services. Cultural attributes of **micro-managing** and **bureaucracy** come into play when **control** is a dominant feature in the culture.

Increased **openness (transparency)** of organizational processes drives how aligned employees are to organizational goals without controlling mechanisms. This alignment requires greater cross-organization discussion of the information and constraints that are driving decisions and the organizational integrity to openly explain

the rationale for actions taken or not taken. To a large extent this cultural attribute builds on a foundation of employee empowerment and trust.

While not diminishing the importance of regulatory compliance, **diversity** can be seen as a human development issue that builds mental models from different cultural experiences in the past. Developing within different ethnic and gender backgrounds greatly influences not only past experiences, but attitudes toward others. But developmental pressures come from many more areas than those covered by government regulations. Virtually every experience somehow shapes each person as an individual thereby creating a unique reservoir of knowledge and opinion that yields the innovation required for meeting business challenges.

Without specific action toward gaining a diversity of mental models, the organization is doomed to inbred thinking that is commonly associated with "yes men." The key problem with moving toward a culture based on diverse mental models is that there are often two conflicting cultures in this space. One culture focuses attention on an economically rational model of past achievement extrapolated into the future. This approach to decision-making leans toward similar mental models that both agree with the determination of economic value and how that value is to be derived in implementation. On the other hand, others are more prone to place a value on existing relationships and consensus among those involved. However, such relationships are likely to be influenced by social compatibility, which runs counter to promoting diversity. In both cases, some effort is necessary to purposefully try to understand alternate points of view.

Further, management may value industry knowledge and the quick application of that knowledge in decision-making, which is reflected in a more intuitive approach to business problems. An alternate approach bases decision-making on more methodical analysis being used to obtain consensus prior to taking action. More rigorous **technical analysis** requires not only an appreciation for alternate decision making processes, but the addition of new skills in analytical techniques.

The path to a high performance culture

A path forward involves initiating organization dialogue on how culture might assist in being successful in adapting to a changing business environment as well as how it might be holding the organization back in other areas. This dialogue could be facilitated by a cross-organization team that consolidates ideas and serves as the flywheel for dialogue within the local business units. The outcome from this dialogue would be the shared vision of what the culture might be and how different aspects of culture are interconnected. Further, a cultural assessment could be conducted to provide material to promote dialogue.