

# Managing Organizational Culture

**Author :** Willow Jacobson

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*An organizational culture will be established or will occur... be proactive.*

**Elected leaders in Oceanboro promised voters that they would create greater efficiency in two operations, but they haven't offered any specifics. The town has decided to restructure and create a Business Management office in which Finance and Human Resources are now combined into one department. The Director of this new department is about to convene the first staff meeting of the newly combined department, and she wants to make sure to set the right tone. As she prepares for the meeting, she recalls the management courses she attended while earning her MPA at the UNC School of Government, and in particular, the role of culture in organizations. The members of the department come from departments with very different cultures—each bringing a different set of assumptions and behaviors related to collaboration, communication, prioritizing strategies, and conflict resolution. Can she manage those different cultures, and how can she establish the right culture on the new department to ensure that its work proceeds as smoothly as possible?**

To start, it is helpful to think about what culture is and what it means to establish an organizational culture.

Edgar Schein defines culture as “deeper level of basic assumptions and beliefs that are shared by members of an organization, that operate unconsciously, and that define in a basic ‘taken-for-granted’ fashion and organization’s view of itself and its environment.” Culture involves the learned responses to deal with internal problems and ways to survive in a dynamic external environment. Culture guides day-to-day working relationships and determines how individuals communicate within an organization or group, and how power and status is allocated. In particular, it

- Defines boundaries –lets people know what activities are appropriate and where they work
- Gives a sense of identity –individuals align with a set of distinctive, collective characteristics
- Generates commitment
- Enhances stability
- Promotes sense-making –ways of structuring the unknown
- Provides a control mechanism
- Culture helps define how the organization meets goals and deals with outsiders.

There are two common approaches to developing a culture for this new board. One is to take a “wait and see” approach looking for what develops and how the group decide to work together. Alternatively, a more active strategy is to work to influence the culture as it develops. A culture will be created in either scenario though culture is hard to change once created making a “wait and see” approach a risky proposition.

Culture generally begins with a founder or early leader who articulates and implements particular ideas and values as a vision, philosophy, or strategy. By convening a group that has a common goal or interest, leaders give incipient shape to culture. For example, think about how you will speak to the vision and goals of this board? How will you make sure the vision is shared? How will you agree on ground rules for the meetings? How will you self-police? How will you manage conflict?

Culture is learned, and it evolves with new experiences. Members will spend time at the beginning trying to figure out the new group. This does *not* mean that a culture can be imposed. It develops during the course of social interaction, so a manager who wants to change or create culture must create conditions or set parameters for this interaction. Culture ultimately arises as shared meaning. Thus a skilled manager must be able to manage meaning by symbolizing the values of the organization, exerting power to develop codes of conduct, and shaping opinion. Promote desired assumptions. Recognize and reward behavior consistent with these assumptions.

Through actions such as rewarding behaviors, shared meaning is created about these actions and their value to the group. The same event can mean very different things to different people because of the different perspectives they use to interpret experiences. These perspectives are shaped by the organization or group. What is important about any event, therefore, is *not* what *happened*, but *what it means*. Many events are more important for what they express than for what they produce. Consider for example what having the mayor give the group a charge for action would imply compared to the same message delivered by a staff member.

The new Business Management Department for Oceanboro has the opportunity to make an impact on the town. Through thoughtful management and leadership of this group, the department’s ability to work well together and to meet the needs of the town and each member of the department will be enhanced.