

Myth Busting: Coming to Grips with Organizational Culture and Climate¹

“The bottom line for leaders is that if they do not become conscious of the cultures in which they are embedded, these cultures will manage them. Cultural understanding is desirable for all of us, but it is essential to leaders if they are to lead.”

- Edgar H. Schein²

INTRODUCTION

It is the first day of class at CGSC and you feel anxious as you look around the classroom. Though you know better, you start to make judgments.

“He looks like a good guy.”

“I think she is full of herself.”

“Those two are buddy-buddy.”

“The Staff Group Advisor is older than dirt.”

“The guy at the end looks as dumb as a bag of rocks.”

You sigh. This is not your first Army school and you realize the road ahead will be bumpy for a few weeks as you feel out your classmates and the battle rhythm of the college.

“Welcome to CGSC,” begins the SGA. “Look around the room. You will spend the next ten months with the people in this classroom. By the time you graduate, the friendships you develop will span the rest of your military career and beyond. This is your CGSC family.”

“Really?”

Really or at least “maybe.” Some staff groups become inseparable. They work and play together and genuinely like and care for one another. Other groups maintain professional relationships in school and go their separate ways after class. Finally, a select few groups barely tolerate each other and count the minutes until the end of class. Why is that? What is the difference between the “super groups” and the ones that prefer a six-hour lecture to a 30-minute small group exercise?

The difference is organizational culture and climate. Specifically, it is the interrelationship between these two seminal concepts and how leaders influence one – organizational climate – to shape the other – organizational culture. Leaders that understand this interdependent relationship can quickly decipher the behavior that drives the thinking within organizations as it solves problems and manages internal anxiety.³ More importantly, by understanding this relationship, leaders can better influence the organization’s culture through the climate to solve problems and get results.

¹ By Carey W. Walker and Matthew J. Bonnot, the Department of Command and Leadership for the CGSC - not to be further reproduced – 2015.

² Edgar H. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 4th ed., (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 22.

³ Ibid, 18.

DEFINING ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE AND CLIMATE

Organizational culture is not a sexy Army term. It lacks the panache of Warrior Ethos and the gravitas of Mission Command. It often is used in conjunction with command climate, and many people tend to use the terms synonymously (e.g., “It is important for leaders to promote a culture and climate of trust”).⁵ Culture and climate are not the same. In fact, they are not even close. “Climate” is the front man, the crowd stealer, the glitzy, showy buzzword that gets all the attention. Organizational culture is the man behind the curtain, the shadow operator who calls the shots, but never is seen nor heard. Culture shapes organizational thinking, feelings, and behavior much like personality shapes the actions of the reader, but many leaders rarely recognize or acknowledge the influence of organizational culture when making decisions and solving problems.

Organizational Culture. In its most basic connotation, *organizational culture is the shared beliefs of a group used to solve problems and manage internal anxiety.* By shared beliefs, we mean the collective norms and values of an organization. Norms define acceptable behaviors associated with outcomes important to the organization. These outcomes are what the organization values. In other words, norms are used to achieve outcomes the organization values.⁶ Shared beliefs are inculcated within the organization as old members teach new arrivals how to think, feel, and behave to solve problems and maintain the group’s internal stability. These norms and values reflect the organization’s shared learning or “what we do and why we do it,” and are difficult for outside observers or new members to understand.

Developing a Culture⁴

Five monkeys are in a large cage. One day, the zookeeper erects a ladder and ties a banana to the top rung. As soon as the keeper leaves, one of the monkeys begins to scamper up the ladder to claim the coveted banana. Immediately upon touching the ladder, the zookeeper sprays all of the monkeys with ice water, causing them to retreat into their shelters.

The water spraying is repeated every time a monkey attempts to climb the ladder and retrieve the banana. Monkeys are smart creatures and they quickly learn the new norm, “Do not climb the ladder!”

Next, the keeper replaces one of the original animals with a monkey from another zoo exhibit. The new monkey immediately attempts to climb the ladder to retrieve the banana and is violently repelled by the other four. After repeated beatings, the new monkey learns the norm, “Do not climb the ladder!”

Once again, the keeper replaces an original monkey with a new one and the cycle repeats. The new monkey attempts to climb the ladder to retrieve a banana and is immediately beaten by his four peers.

The zookeeper eventually replaces all the original monkeys in the cage. None of the current monkeys have experienced the spray of ice water for climbing the ladder, but they all know from their peers that climbing the ladder is wrong and will result in an immediate and violent response from fellow monkeys in the cage.

This is the power of culture.

⁴ Many MBA programs use a version of the “Monkey Story” to illustrate how an organizational culture develops. Supposedly, the story was inspired in part by the rhesus monkey experiments of G.R. Stephenson in 1967.

⁵ Department of the Army, ADRP 6-22, *Army Leadership* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, August 2012), para. 6-50.

⁶ Our reference to values does not have an ethical connotation. We are not referring to principles or concepts that guide right and wrong behavior. Our focus is on what is of value, worth, or importance to an organization.

Toxic Leadership⁷

Discussions of Army leadership inevitably lead to the topic of toxic leaders. It is a “hot button” issue eliciting a wide range of emotions on the characteristics and behaviors that make someone toxic. The problem with this topic is that one person’s toxic leader is another’s fair but demanding boss. Where do we draw the line?

In an attempt to frame the issue, COL George Reed defines three key elements of toxic leaders: 1) “an apparent lack of concern for the wellbeing of subordinates,” 2) “a personality or interpersonal technique that negatively affects organizational climate,” and 3) “a conviction by subordinates that the leader is motivated primarily by self-interest.” All in all, Reed concludes, it is the command climate that suffers the most because of toxic leadership.

Uncovering toxic leaders is problematic. Army command climate surveys are useful in comparing a unit’s climate to a Service average, but provide little clarity on the existence of a toxic leadership environment within organizations. Additionally, the Army places great emphasis on the value of loyalty, which often leads to a reluctance by subordinates to question the conduct of the boss and air “dirty laundry” to a higher headquarters.

In the end, there is no magic process for uncovering toxic leaders. It requires resolute superiors acting as role models, teachers, and coaches. When toxic leadership surfaces in the command, leaders must root it out before it debilitates the command climate and jeopardizes the organizational culture.

Solving problems and managing internal anxiety are the catalysts for the creation of an organization’s culture. Psychologist Edgar Schein describes cultural formation using the terms external adaptation and internal integration.⁸ External adaptation, or problem solving, focuses on the actions of an organization to accomplish its mission and achieve results. These external actions typically are the most important activities leaders undertake because they deal with the achievement, and often survival, of the group, and serve as litmus tests for assessing the success or failure of the leader.

Internal integration, which is managing internal anxiety, requires focusing on people and their collective needs. Taking care of people means creating a stable environment that fosters consistent behavior and predictable outcomes for followers. This stability allows organizational members to learn the rules for power, influence, and status within the group. Members learn the norms governing behavior and the pecking order for moving up. To build trust and confidence within the organization, leaders allocate awards and punishments. If members understand “what right looks like,” it reduces anxiety and strengthens unit cohesion.⁹

When issues of external adaptation and internal integration conflict,¹⁰ military organizations usually default to addressing operational concerns. A “mission first” ethos is well ingrained in all service cultures. Additionally, the military traditionally rewards leaders based on short-term mission success, not the well-being of organizational members. If leaders “ruffle a few feathers” to accomplish the mission, many senior leaders look the other way. This

willingness to turn a blind eye towards internal integration issues helps create the perception that many Army leaders tolerate toxic leadership to ensure mission success.

Organizational Climate. *Organizational climate consists of collective perceptions of the work environment shared by members of the organization. It is “a reflection how people think and feel about their organization now.”¹¹ In other words, it is a snapshot of the organization that depicts the current mood and attitude of its members with respect to their work and the unit’s activities. Associating an organization’s collective work perceptions with a weather term is appropriate since command climate can*

⁷ George E. Reed, COL, “Toxic Leadership,” *Military Review* (July-August 2004), 67 - 71.

⁸ Edgar H. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 4th ed., 18.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 94.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 92.

¹¹ Department of the Army, ADRP 6-22, *Army Leadership*, para. 7-7.

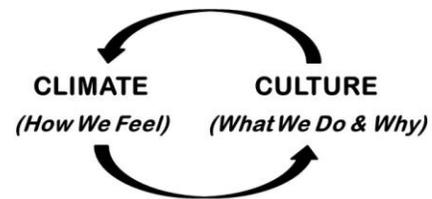
shift quickly based on changes to the operational environment as well as internal factors such as actions of leaders within the unit.

Good leaders closely monitor the climate within organizations as a barometer of morale. “Research in military, government, and business organizations shows that positive environments lead to individuals who feel better about themselves, have stronger commitments, and produce better work. If leaders set the tone for a positive climate, others will respond in kind.”¹² “An upbeat climate encourages individuals to recognize the need for organizational change and supports a willing attitude of learning to work with change.”¹³

What is the Difference? As mentioned earlier, many leaders are challenged with differentiating between culture and climate. Here is an easy way to distinguish between the two concepts. Culture helps explain *what we do*, the norms that define acceptable behavior in the organization; and *why we do it*, the outcomes we value for the organization. Together, the *what* and *why* (the norms and values) form the shared beliefs of the culture. On the other hand, climate is much more capricious than culture, but still very important. It focuses on *how we feel* as we carry out these actions.



Organizational culture and climate have an interdependent relationship. *Effective leaders use climate as a tool to sustain, strengthen, and/or modify the shared beliefs that form an organization’s culture.* Leaders shape the climate, both intentionally and unintentionally, through their personal conduct. This can range from direct action, such as role modeling expected behavior, to indirect actions such as formal statements and policy decisions.¹⁴ Ideally, leaders create a supportive command climate, one that fosters mutual trust and psychological safety, to enhance the organization’s ability to solve problems and manage internal anxiety. Leaders who sacrifice a supportive climate for short-term success run the risk of creating patterns of behavior, i.e., norms, which manifest into shared beliefs that stifle innovation, adaptive thinking, and self-direction. Balancing short-term success with long-term improvement is a constant challenge leaders face as they juggle mission requirements with the developmental needs of the organization.



Conversely, culture also influences the climate. Norms and values within a stable organizational culture establish limits for acceptable behavior within groups. When members operate within existing norms, their actions foster a stable command climate. When member actions fall outside acceptable norms of conduct, their behavior disrupts the emotional stability of the organization and creates an unsettled command climate.

Before getting too far into our discussion, we need to examine some popular military views on organizational culture. Because people tend to blur the terms culture and climate, many in the service

¹² Ibid, para. 7-10.

¹³ Ibid, para. 7-19.

¹⁴ Carey W. Walker and Matthew J. Bonnot, “Improving while Operating: The Paradox of Learning,” CGSC (August 2014), 7-9. This article for the L105 lesson highlights six influence techniques, which Edgar Schein calls primary embedding mechanisms, leaders use to modify values and behavior within organizations. One of these techniques is role modeling. To reinforce these ideas, Schein discusses the use of secondary articulation and reinforcement mechanisms to make these ideas stick within the culture. Examples include formal statements, policy making, and organizational systems. We cover the secondary mechanisms in the L205 lesson reading, “Leader Development: Enhancing the Lessons of Experience.”

struggle with differentiating fact from fiction when addressing these concepts. To eliminate the confusion, we will do some myth busting on organizational culture. Three powerful myths that shape the thinking of Army leaders on culture are: 1) strategic leaders are the primary agents of cultural change in the Army; 2) organizational leaders must focus on command climate, not culture; and 3) cultural change is a slow process that takes years to occur.

DEBUNKING THE MYTHS OF ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

7-5. Climate and culture describe the environment in which a leader leads. The leader shapes the environment in which the leader and others operate. Culture refers to the environment of the Army as an institution and of major elements or communities within it. Strategic leaders shape the Army's culture, while organizational and direct leaders shape the climate of units and organizations.

– ADRP 6-22, Aug 12

Myth #1: Strategic Leaders are the primary agents of cultural change in the Army. The above doctrinal passage seems to imply organizational-level leaders need not worry about culture. Their sole focus is the climate of units and organizations – culture falls under the purview of general officers at the strategic level! While embellishing the power of senior leaders, this statement is a “half-truth” at best. Strategic leaders undoubtedly influence Army culture, but organizational-level leaders are hip deep into culture whether they know it or not. They play a significant role in shaping organizational culture just as senior leaders shape Army culture.

The doctrinal passage fails to recognize that all people belong to numerous groups and categories, exposing them to different “levels of culture.” These levels include national, ethnic, religious, gender, generational, social class, and organizational/work culture.¹⁵ We can further stratify work-level culture based on the size of the organization. In the military, this includes service, branch, and various types of unit culture. For example, an airborne force has a different organizational culture than an armored or mechanized unit. Even the smallest work group, a fire team for example, has unique shared beliefs if its members have a common purpose, a collective history, and problems to solve.

From a leadership perspective, these various levels of culture mean new members bring a wide variety of personal values to their organizations that could conflict with existing shared beliefs of the workforce. The Army, because of its size and bureaucracy, has the ability to mitigate many of these individual conflicts through the use of institutional norms and values, i.e., Warrior Ethos, which refer to the “professional attitudes and beliefs that characterize the American Soldier;”¹⁶ and Army Values, which “consist of the principles, standards, and qualities considered essential for successful Army leaders.”¹⁷ Institutional beliefs do not replace personal values, but they do establish standards of expected behavior.

Consequently, the “Big Army” does create a norms and values-based institutional culture, which influences the shared beliefs of Soldiers and civilians at all levels within the service. However, thinking, feeling, and behaving at the organizational level are driven by more than institutional culture. Norms and values result from shared learning as members solve problems and manage internal anxiety, and this learning occurs at all levels of the institution, not just the highest. Remember, culture exists across all strata within the military, not just the upper echelons, and the most influential changes that affect Soldiers on a day-to-day basis arguably occur at the organizational level.

¹⁵ Geert Hofstede and Gert Jan Hofstede, *Cultures and Organizations Software of the Mind*, 2nd ed., (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005), 11.

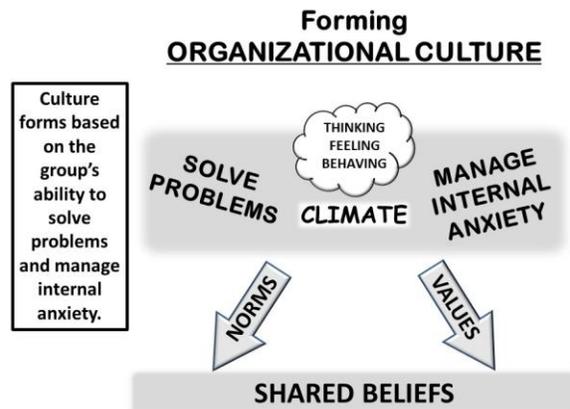
¹⁶ Department of the Army, ADRP 6-22, Army Leadership, para. 3-21.

¹⁷ Ibid, para. 3-3.

Myth #2: Organizational leaders must focus on command climate, not culture. If one believes culture only exists at the institutional level and is controlled by strategic leaders, then it seems logical to assume organizational leaders must focus all their energy on managing the command climate of an organization. After all, culture is outside their span of influence. This is a logical conclusion but again fails to recognize the role of culture at the organizational level.

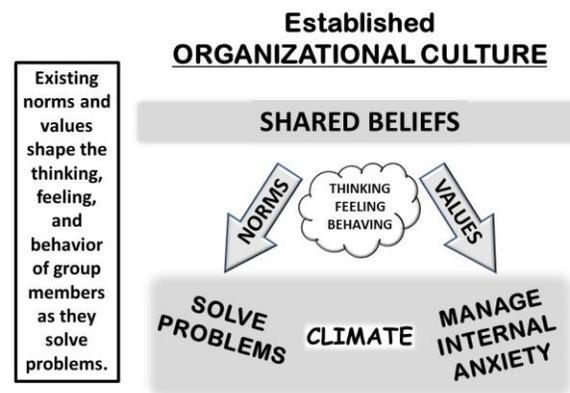
To better grasp the role of organizational culture, we need to look at three phases of cultural development within organizations. This will help us understand when leaders must deliberately weigh in on culture and attempt to impose modified values and behaviors on organizations to shape thinking, feeling, and behaving, and when it is better to limit one’s focus to reinforcing existing shared beliefs.

The first phase of development leaders must understand focuses on cultural formation within new groups or organizations. Members learn patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving as they solve problems and build cohesiveness. As the organization’s actions prove successful, these patterns evolve into norms and values, which eventually move into one’s subconsciousness¹⁸ as shared beliefs.



The primary role of the leader is to set conditions for the groups’ success by teaching the organization how to think, feel, and behave to successfully solve its problems. Leaders complement this learning process through the building of a supportive command climate, the most powerful influencing tool they bring to the table. As a result, the group adopts the beliefs and values of the leader as it achieves success and evolves into a cohesive organization.

The second phase critical to understanding cultural development focuses on established organizations in which the culture is already formed. Shared beliefs guide the collective thinking, feelings, and behavior of group members as they solve problems and maintain a stable work environment.¹⁹



The role of organizational climate is much more nuanced in established cultures. Since experienced

¹⁸ By “subconsciousness” we mean the norms and values become taken for granted without conscious thought. They exist in one’s memory – you know they exist – but you do not consciously think of them. Compare it to carrying on a conversation while driving a car. You do not consciously consider your driving actions though, if questioned, you could explain what you are doing and why you are doing it. See *Three Minds: Consciousness, Subconsciousness, and Unconsciousness* at <http://staroversky.com/blog/three-minds-conscious-subconscious-unconscious>.

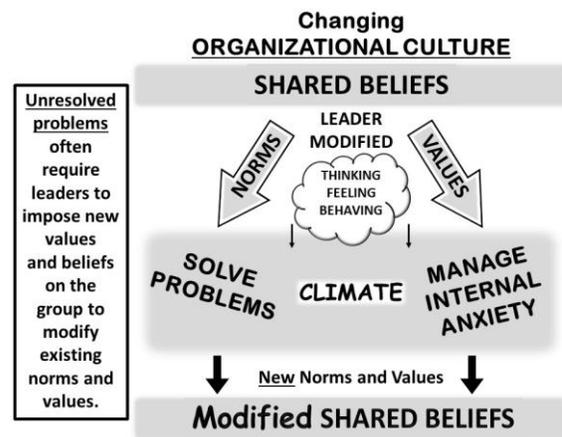
¹⁹ When discussing norms and values, our focus is on patterned or collective actions demonstrated over time, not individual behaviors driven by sudden changes in the surrounding environment. Many behaviors occurring in organizations have nothing to do with organizational culture. As Schein states in his book, *Organizational Culture and Leadership, 4th ed.*, p. 20, “We cannot rely on overt behavior alone [to explain culture] because it is always determined by the cultural predisposition (the perceptions, thoughts, and feelings that are patterned) and by the situational contingencies that arise from the immediate external environment.” This is why leaders must understand shared beliefs from the perspective of outcomes valued by the group and the associated behaviors used to achieve these outcomes. Always bear in mind, cultural norms focus on collective behaviors, not errant behaviors of individual group members.

members already understand expectations for acceptable behavior and the desired outcomes for the group, the leaders' primary role with culture in this phase is ensuring they have personal awareness of the norms and values used in problem solving and managing internal integration. With this knowledge, leaders can reinforce the shared beliefs through the climate of the organization.

If leaders lack this understanding, they can inadvertently browbeat a strong organization to the point of distraction. Think of the last player standing in a game of musical chairs. He races about pushing and shoving others, creating a general nuisance, as he attempts to find his place. This is the leader who does not understand the norms and values of an organization. Instead of setting the organization up for success, he creates turmoil with his actions by not knowing what people do or why they do it.

The third phase of development leaders must understand involves changing culture. This is potentially the most critical phase because it concerns organizations that cannot successfully solve problems of external adaptation or internal integration. Existing norms and/or values fail to define acceptable problem solving behaviors and the organization faces uncertainty and internal anxiety.

There is no dodging cultural understanding in this phase of an organization's development. In the previous phase, laissez faire leaders could be oblivious of the established culture within their organization if the environment (both internal and external) was stable, consistent, and predictable. Unfortunately, this is rarely the case in today's military in which uncertainty, adaptive enemy forces, and rapidly changing conditions are emblematic of the operating environment. Therefore, leaders often must modify existing values or behaviors to influence shared beliefs as organizations solve challenging problems of external adaptation and internal integration.



In summary, effective leaders work through the climate to sustain, strengthen, and/or modify the shared beliefs that form an organization's culture. They cannot do so if they fail to understand the role of culture at the organizational level.

Myth #3: Cultural change is a slow process that takes years to occur. If one believes culture only exists at the institutional level and is controlled by strategic leaders, then it is fair to assume it changes slowly. Implementing change across the breadth and depth of such a massive institution as the U.S. Army often takes years of effort. Fortunately, this is not the case at the organizational level.

In our discussions of Myth #2, we described three phases of cultural development in organizations, with the third – implementing organizational change – potentially being the most critical from a leadership perspective. When a leader implements significant change, it inevitably means challenging existing norms and values. This can occur in one of two ways. The easiest is “to draw on the strengths of the culture” by embracing existing norms and values to trump opposing norms and values within the organization that conflict with the change initiative.²⁰

²⁰ Edgar H. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 4th ed., 327.

An excellent example of conflicting shared beliefs comes from the Iraq War in 2004 when the Secretary of Defense extended Army tour lengths from 12 to 15 months.²¹ At the institutional level, senior leaders handled this action poorly, treating it as a policy initiative rather than a major leadership challenge. They passed the buck to the organizational level where leaders faced the unenviable task of implementing the plan. Initial feedback was harsh. Many deployed Soldiers felt their leaders had violated a bedrock belief – *leaders take care of Soldiers*. Extending tours three months, especially for units about to redeploy, was hardly looking out for subordinate interests!

Many organizational-level leaders softened the impact of the decision by appealing to their Soldiers' sense of obligation, duty, and selfless service. They understood cultural norms and values are sometimes at odds, and leaders must step forward to help guide the discussion and temper the conflicting emotions.

Arguably, this first approach of drawing on the strengths of the culture does not actually change the culture. While it does involve challenging existing norms and values, it does not result in new shared beliefs. It simply shifts the focus of the organization to other portions of the organization's collective consciousness that better support the change initiative. Organizations have multiple shared beliefs. It is always more expeditious to embrace, rather than modify, existing norms and values when leading change.

When it is not possible to embrace current elements of the culture (i.e., when existing shared beliefs are acting as constraints to change), leaders must use the second and harder approach for dealing with change, which is to modify shared beliefs as described in our Myth #2 discussion. How fast can leaders modify norms and values to change the culture? It depends to a great extent on the maturity of the organization.

Shared beliefs evolve in organizations as they mature and grow.²² As described earlier, the culture in forming organizations is strongly influenced by leaders as they set conditions for the group's success. Influencing shared beliefs in mature organizations

"I want to be able to eat off of it!"

In 1986 I commanded a mechanized infantry company in Germany. Our new battalion commander had been in the unit about 30 days when he decided to inspect the motor pool. He began with the M113s in my company, ancient armored personnel carriers (APCs) from the Vietnam era. He had us open the engine panels and remove the floorboards from the troop compartment.

"I want to be able to eat off of it," he said.

I was not sure what I was hearing. "Excuse me?" I said.

"I want the engine compartment and the space under the floorboards so clean we could eat a meal off of it," he explained.

I was flabbergasted. "Why?" I exclaimed.

"Because you just might learn something about maintenance when you properly clean your vehicle," he replied.

And learn we did.

To his credit, my battalion commander set us up for success beginning with the basics – he got us the cleaning supplies we needed (to include power washers). Additionally, every Soldier, including officers, received coveralls, no small logistics feat for Germany of the 1980s. Finally, he ensured every person who rode on a vehicle was in the motor pool during motor stables, beginning with himself. He was the primary role model, teacher, and coach for the battalion.

After the initial shock of scrubbing engine compartments, a transformation unfolded in the battalion. We began to take pride in our vehicles. Not only were the engine and floorboard compartments clean, but our tracks ran better as we uncovered problems we never would have found before "the scrubbing." Maintenance was no longer a buzz word in the battalion. It was what we did to ensure our ability to fight and win.

²¹ This example is based on anecdotal evidence from CGSC students shared in the classroom over the last ten years.

²² Edgar H. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 4th ed., 273.

is much more challenging. These organizations typically are very good at handling routine and redundant issues—they have a long history of success—but struggle with complexity and change. In the military, mature organizations often have a core of government civilians that have been together for many years. Shared beliefs are well ensconced within the psyche of the organization and changing norms and values often requires a significant event such as dealing with mission failure, a large infusion of fresh blood/newcomers, or a major scandal.²³ Without such an event, modifying shared beliefs in organizations with little turnover of personnel can take years.

Fortunately, consistent personnel turnover is common within the Army's operating force, which means troop units share many of the same characteristics of new organizations undergoing cultural formation. This characterization is reinforced by the Army's use of 18-24 month command tours, normal rotation cycles, and defined reenlistment contract periods. As a result, adept commanders have the ability to influence cultural norms and values as they shape the climate through their personal actions. To put it plainly, organizational-level leaders can change the culture within organizations in the operating force, and they can do it during their watch.

One can see from the above arguments that organizational culture and its shaping tool, organizational climate, influence your daily life within the military. These two seminal concepts affect how you feel, what you do, and why you exhibit certain behaviors within your organization. Simply recognizing the importance of these ideas is not enough. You must be able to use them, which requires, as a minimum, the ability to identify the critical shared beliefs within your organization that aid or hinder you as a leader.²⁴ Collectively, these shared beliefs compose what we characterize as the "cultural frame" of the organization.

UNCOVERING THE CULTURAL FRAME

Assessment Options. Attempting to map the entire culture of an organization is a fruitless endeavor. The number of norms and values is endless, and identifying all of them would be a fool's errand. Luckily, there is a better way. It involves uncovering the shared beliefs associated with the most critical functions performed by the organization. These shared beliefs form the "cultural frame," the essential norms and values that drive thinking, feeling, and behaving within the organization.

Uncovering the cultural frame is challenging, especially for new leaders. A traditional approach is to observe and assess organizational processes, practices, and behaviors over a period of weeks and months to slowly assimilate oneself into the organization and uncover the shared beliefs that drive how people think, feel, and behave. While this is a common method used by new commanders, it can lead to questionable and inconclusive findings without constant dialogue and feedback from subordinates. Additionally, the extensive time required to learn the norms and values could prove problematic in organizations facing short-term mission requirements or sudden changes in the operating environment.

Conversely, Edgar Schein describes a more aggressive multistep approach using a group interview process for assessing an organization's culture.²⁵ Under his methodology, the assessment could occur in a matter of hours. While appealing for its speed of use, Schein only recommends this application during periods of change and transformation when organizations confront significant upheaval – he believes leaders should leave culture alone until it becomes a detriment to accomplishing one's mission.²⁶ We do not find Schein's reactive approach to problem solving very appealing. It is like walking in the dark and

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Edgar H. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 3rd ed., 337.

²⁵ Edgar H. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 4th ed., 315-327.

²⁶ Ibid, 315.

turning on one's flashlight only after bumping into obstacles. Why not have the light on when beginning the journey?

A Six-Step Framing Method. We think a better method draws from both the traditional approach and the Schein approach. It involves initially focusing on individual leader actions to establish context, build credibility, and collect information; followed by collective interviews to confirm findings and conclusions.³¹

(1) *Conducting Research.* To understand the most important shared beliefs within a culture, leaders must first identify the organization's critical functions, i.e., the major activities that must be accomplished to ensure unit success. Most new organizational-level leaders identify these specific functions before setting foot in a unit based on personal experience, research, and prior coordination. Upon arrival, they confirm their research with key leaders to include their new boss.

Leaders should limit the critical functions to a half dozen or so of the most important activities performed by the organization. These activities are not the unit's Mission Essential Task List (METL). They are the functions that trigger the METL within an operating unit. For example, in an infantry unit, three of the functions might be train for decisive action, deploy rapidly, and close with and destroy enemy forces.³²

(2) *Setting Conditions.* Once leaders know where to concentrate their effort, they can shift their focus to the organization's climate. Framing the culture requires managing the climate since leaders work through the climate to influence shared beliefs and reduce internal anxiety.

Command Climate and Motivation

Building a supportive command climate begins with a fundamental understanding of motivation.

Motivation is anything that provides direction, intensity, and persistence to behavior.²⁷ Intrinsic motivation is driven by an interest or enjoyment in the task itself, and exists within the individual rather than relying on any external pressure. The three factors that drive intrinsic motivation are a sense of purpose (a cause greater than yourself), autonomy (being self-directed), and mastery (becoming better at something that matters to you).²⁸

Extrinsic motivation comes from outside the individual and focuses on attaining an outcome. Factors that drive extrinsic motivation include rewards (money and grades), competitions, coercion, and threats of punishment.

*Job satisfaction is directly tied to the **intrinsic** factors of motivation—people like doing work that is inherently interesting and enjoyable; it provides value to them. Job dissatisfaction is influenced by negative factors of **extrinsic** motivation such as a bad boss, poor work conditions, or low pay.*

Job satisfaction and job dissatisfaction act independently of each other, which means increasing the positive factors of extrinsic motivation (giving someone time off for example) will not increase job satisfaction; it will simply reduce job dissatisfaction. In other words, time off does not make the job more enjoyable (though it could make an unpleasant job less objectionable).²⁹

Creating a supportive command climate means appealing to the factors that drive intrinsic motivation (purpose, autonomy, and mastery)³⁰ while reducing the extrinsic factors that create job dissatisfaction.

²⁷ Richard L. Hughes, Robert C. Ginnett, and Gordon J. Curphy, *Leadership: Enhancing the Lessons of Experience* (New York: McGraw-Hill Irwin, 2006), 243.

²⁸ Daniel H. Pink, *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2009), Chapters 4, 5, and 6.

²⁹ Frederick Herzberg, "One More Time: How Do You Motivate Employees?" *Harvard Business Review* (January 2003), 1.

³⁰ Carey W. Walker and Matthew J. Bonnot, "The Vision Process: Seven Steps to a Better Organization," CGSC (August 2012), 7. This article, which is the primary reading for L109, discusses how leaders appeal to the factors of intrinsic motivation.

³¹ While we list the steps sequentially to simplify the explanation of each, steps 2-4 typically occur concurrently.

³² The same concept applies to non-deployable Army units. In the Department of Command and Leadership, for example, we have three critical functions: *teaching*, *lesson development*, and *professional development/life-long learning*.

Leaders have an array of methods for effecting the climate as outlined in ADRP 6-22.³³ To put these actions into place, leaders use the military maxim of “leadership by walking around.” This means talking to subordinates, asking questions, and listening to responses to gain a sense of the mood and attitude within the work environment. By maintaining a positive and inquisitive attitude, leaders make it clear they are there to learn about the organization, not judge it. This step serves two purposes. First, it creates a foundation for a climate of mutual trust and psychological safety within the organization. Second, by understanding the climate, leaders can better sense the challenges associated with influencing attitudes and behavior within the organization (see the climate call out box).

(3) *Identifying Organizational Norms.* Leadership by walking around serves several purposes. As mentioned above, when done properly it sets the conditions for a supportive command climate and improves leader understanding. Additionally, it allows leaders to observe patterns of behavior associated with the organization’s critical functions. These patterns of behavior, when collectively repeated by group members, are the established norms used to achieve outcomes valued by the organization.

(4) *Identifying Organizational Values.* It is easy to see what people are doing. It is deceptively hard to understand why. With a supportive command climate, members of the organization are much more amenable to explaining their thinking and behavior. Members may not, however, share a consensus on why they do what they do. Remember, norms are associated with outcomes important to the organization. The outcomes are what the organization holds in value. While most members will agree on organizational norms, the values are much more difficult to articulate. Many people may not fully understand the outcomes associated with certain activities, or why these activities are important to the organization. This is why the following step is necessary – leaders must have a collective process for confirming their initial cultural frame.

(5) *Collective Confirmation of Findings.*³⁴ At this point in the framing process, we shift to the Schein methodology and adopt elements of his approach for gaining and confirming collective feedback.³⁵ So far, the leader has gathered a tentative list of norms and values, i.e., shared beliefs, associated with the primary functions of the organization. Because the beliefs are supposed to be shared by all, the leader can use a group setting now to validate or make adjustments to the findings.

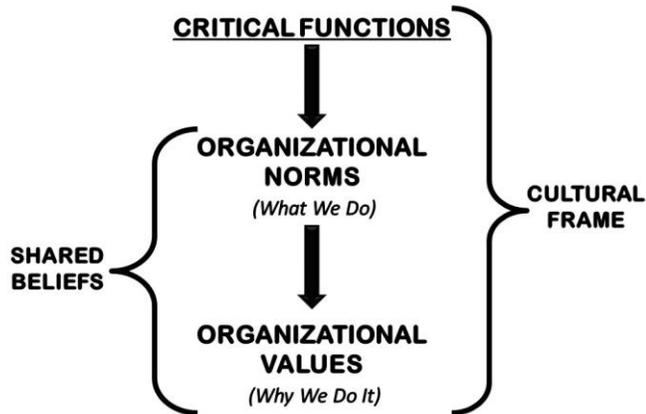
- *Select Interview Groups.* In consultation with key members of the organization, the leader forms multiple discussion groups to capture a diverse mix of leaders, followers, and important subcultures within the organization.
- *Explain the Process.* The leader ensures group members understand the purpose of cultural framing, how the process works, and the critical organizational functions used to guide the effort.
- *Confirm Organizational Norms.* The leader presents the norms associated with the critical functions of the organization. Some of the norms may not resonate with all group members since every member might not be associated with all the critical functions of the organization.

³³ Department of the Army, ADRP 6-22, *Army Leadership*, table 7-1. The table provides a summary of the leadership competency *Create a Positive Environment*. Key points include fostering teamwork, encouraging open communications, inspiring initiative, demonstrating care for followers, and setting high expectations.

³⁴ Many experienced leaders will elect to skip the use of formal groups recommended in Step 5 and confirm their initial cultural frame through questioning of subordinates as they continue the practice of “leadership by walking around.”

³⁵ Schein outlines a ten-step culture assessment process.

- *Confirm Organizational Values.* Validating the values is the most difficult portion of the confirmation process because there could be a number of conflicting opinions in the justification of an organizational norm. One method of simplifying this process for the group is to visually map the relationship on a whiteboard by aligning the *critical function* → *norms* → *values* as depicted in the diagram to the right. This allows the members to observe the sequencing and debate the recommendations. The leaders' primary role is to build a group consensus, typically by repeating the same question, "Why," until satisfied the group has uncovered a clear cause and effect relationship leading to the organizational value.³⁶



As an example, consider a troop unit in the 82nd Airborne Division. One of its critical functions could be “rapidly deploy the force.” An organizational norm associated with this might be, “all officers will be jumpmaster qualified.” The outcome valued by the organization is that “officers lead by example.” This is a simple example, but one common to the vast majority of units in the 82nd. Officers that do not understand this shared belief are in for a rude awakening, especially if they cannot pass jumpmaster school.

Other cultural frames could be unique to individual units based on patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving learned by the members as they solved problems and built cohesiveness. Consider the earlier story of the battalion commander in Germany wanting clean vehicles. The unit, a mechanized infantry battalion, had a critical function of maintaining its combat pacing items. The commander stated his expectations on cleaning APCs, and these desires quickly transformed into an organizational norm. The organizational value at first was hotly debated. Initially, most Soldiers saw the commander’s directive as busy work and micromanagement. Once vehicle readiness improved, however, attitudes changed and people started to reconsider the boss’ perspective. The commander espoused the importance of clean vehicles as an indicator of overall readiness. This made sense; it was hard to hide a fluid leak on a vehicle that looked like it just came off the assembly line. Over a period of months, the unit began to view vehicle maintenance as more than just a good steam cleaning. On their own initiative, Soldiers began spot painting their tracks and personalizing the crew compartments. Military artwork abounded on the vehicles and unit pride skyrocketed. If we had created a cultural frame for the organization, we would have quickly concluded our vehicle cleanliness norms were driven by unit pride, not military readiness. We would state the shared belief as: *Immaculately cleaned and maintained vehicles reflect the pride we share in our organization.*

This example also highlights the challenge of dealing with espoused values. By espoused, we mean values publically asserted by leaders within the organization. An espoused value may or may not be part of the shared beliefs within the group. Simply stating something is of value, even by organizational-level leaders, does not make it so. Ultimately, a value and its associated norms are defined by the success of

³⁶ The Toyota Production System, <http://www.toyotageorgetown.com/tpsoverview.asp>. The “Five Whys” technique was developed by Toyota as a problem-solving technique for identifying cause and effect relationships and root causes of problems. The basic concept is that by asking “why” five times, investigators can remove layers of symptoms and uncover underlying problems or causes.

the organization, not the commander. While the commander in the above example preached the importance of cleanliness as an indicator of vehicle readiness, the real value eventually emerged from the members of the organization – unit pride.

(6) *Finalizing the Cultural Frame.* The finalized cultural frame is the leader’s best estimate of the most critical shared beliefs within the organization that guide the collective thinking, feelings, and behavior of organizational members. Each shared belief is a composite of associated norm(s) and value(s) blended into a single statement (see the above vehicle maintenance example). The collection of shared beliefs associated with the organization’s critical functions compose the cultural frame. Identifying the cultural frame is not an academic exercise. The leader is developing situational understanding to facilitate future decision-making. Specifically, leaders need to know the degree to which shared beliefs aid or hinder change initiatives. If the beliefs serve as constraints or barriers to change, then the leader will have to take steps to modify existing values or behaviors within the organization.

CONCLUSION

Some readers will object to this article because it fails to acknowledge the primacy of organizational climate. It is a fair assessment. The institutional Army puts great emphasis on command climate surveys as an assessment tool for measuring the health of a command. Leaders clearly need to know how their people think and feel about the work environment. But to what end? Influencing organizational climate without an understanding of the organization’s culture can be an exercise in futility. Some commanders turn it into a misguided popularity contest by attempting to keep followers “happy” with different forms of extrinsic motivation in the belief these actions will improve job satisfaction and organizational performance. Sadly, this approach rarely works when dealing with change initiatives, which typically require leaders to modify existing values or behaviors within the organization to bring about change. If the leaders do not understand what the organization values or the acceptable behaviors for achieving these outcomes, they will be operating in the dark as they attempt to lead the organization.

Effective leaders understand their organizational culture. They learn how members go about solving problems and maintaining the work environment. They realize members have learned collective behaviors that lead to outcomes valued by the organization. These collective behaviors and valued outcomes form the shared beliefs that influence the thinking, feeling, and behaving of the organization.

By discerning the shared beliefs associated with the critical functions of the organization (hopefully through some form of cultural framing), leaders can work through the climate to maximize short-term success and long-term improvement instead of using it as a reward process for keeping Soldiers happy. Astute leaders influence the command climate and use it to sustain, strengthen, and/or modify the shared beliefs that form an organization’s culture to improve the organization and accomplish the mission.