WHAT IS CULTURE?

Culture is one of those terms that are difficult to express distinctly, however everyone knows it when they sense it – whether it is personal or organizational. It is those 'things' that make us who we are – make us do the things we do, or don't do – it is part of our value system, our beliefs, norms, mores (morals) and customs. It is the society we belong to and there are 8 official cultures in South Africa. Each nation rightly celebrates its historical achievements in the form of holidays, processions and commemorative events. All these significant and coherent rituals form part of people's culture, *that* system & pattern of behavior that makes people belong and feel secure. Culture is not a static concept, it is dynamic.

Cultural diversity is the variety of human societies and / or cultures in a specific area. This also includes reference to multiculturalism within an organisation. Diversity is differences we (very often don't) want to find solutions for. What is needed in society and therefore also in the organizations we work, is cultural relativism – what is relevant to your culture is good and I don't have to accept it, however I should respect your point of view and feelings associated with it. While there can be no doubt about the difficulties, there are certain universal principles that will help us to overcome the barriers in the way of cross-cultural interaction. No culture accepts that it is right to kill, physically injure, or steal and every culture accepts certain family concepts such as the close relationship between mother and child. Every human being is capable of cognitive development and we all share certain emotions. There are so many similarities despite our differences - there are basic rights, values and fundamentals that we should be able to afford to any culture or subculture (preferably without government interventions through bills of rights, etc.)

Organizational culture is the personality of the organization. For all organizations out there it is important that there is congruence between the personal cultural beliefs, norms and values of the individuals working for the organization (staff members) and those leading the company (shareholders). Finding the right organizational culture is key to both the staff member and the organization's futures. The progress of staff in an organization will depend a great deal on their compatibility with the set culture and they will / should be rewarded for "fitting in" as much as for what they deliver via competency output. How many times have we seen staff members with exceptional potential being appointed in the perfect job and having the whole experience turned sour because of corporate culture and / or internal politics?

Corporate / Organizational culture can be looked at as a system. The process is based on our assumptions as individuals of what is right and what is wrong, our personal values and norms, e.g., the value we place on money, time, resources, progress and people. The input just explained will have a huge impact on our outputs or effects of our culture, e.g., organizational behaviours, technologies, strategies, image, products, services and appearances.

The concept of culture is particularly important when attempting to manage organization-wide change. Leaders are coming to realize that, despite the best-laid plans and intentions, organizational change must include not only changing structures and processes, but also changing the corporate culture.

It is the responsibility of the organization's Business Partner – the Human Resources Department - to help the leaders and managers appraise the Corporate Culture as much as the Balanced Score Cards, salaries and benefits. It is also imperative to encourage leaders to keep the corporate culture in mind whilst at networking events. Very importantly, leaders should also conduct their structured interviews with the organizational culture in mind.

The following questions should be asked when we try to understand culture within the organization:

- **Who** sets the style and pace? What kind of **Role Model** are they? "Do as we do" or "Do as we say?" Doers vs talkers!
- What **behaviour** is rewarded, condemned or ignored? Is **feedback** constant, intermittent, at job completion, or never? Does the feedback take place during coaching and / or appraisals and is it relevant?
- What **information** is shared? (needed vs. desired information)
- How is 'exceeding' performance **encouraged**? What type of performance appraisal system is used? Do we attract the best qualified candidates to our organization when we recruit and … do we retain the best? Is training and development offered to everyone?

After all has been said and done, one thing remains to be said, and that is that your **attitude** towards culture will determine you quality of experience – both personally and in the corporate world.

For any assistance with setting your corporate culture, change management, setting / revisiting of organizational values through workshops

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