A Quick Guide to Organizational Culture and Onboarding

Organizational culture is defined by the shared assumptions, values, and beliefs that determine how the people within a particular organization perceive, think about, and react to each other and events.

Departments, colleges, and units at the University all have their own unique culture that is shaped by the function, the way people go about their work, and perceptions of where their department, college, or unit. Learning about the culture within the first few weeks is often more important than learning about the job itself.

Why should I connect new employees to culture?

When it comes to learning about the organizational culture, an effective onboarding process is two-fold:

- it helps new employees learn the organizational culture and recognize the behaviors and outcomes that are rewarded and valued; and
- it is about the organization leveraging the new employee’s strengths.

By understanding the organizational culture, employees:

- recognize the unwritten rules and the truth about how things work in their department/college/unit; this does not mean that a new employee must conform to the culture within their organization, however having this knowledge will help them become more effective;
- learn both the positive and the challenging aspects of organization’s culture;
- become productive and engaged, and are less likely to leave within the first few months.

AVOID

- Letting employees “run into” organizational culture.
- Testing new employees by asking them to handle situations without any guidance about the culture.
- Falling into the trap of a culture conversation that is disingenuous and consists of:
  - corporate speak,
  - lofty mission and vision statements
  - strategic plans, or
  - focus only on the positive/aspirational aspects of the culture.

This does not actually help new employees understand how things work and how to be successful and may only set them up for frustration later.
How do I get started?

Use the following question to reflect on your department/college/unit:

**What do people pay attention to?**

- Who are your stakeholders? (i.e. donors, the public, students, internal/external clients, faculty, department chairs, deans, etc.)
- Whose opinion matters the most?
- What does success look like?

**How do people respond when something goes wrong?**

- How do leaders tend to react?
- Are the responses reactive or proactive?
- How is feedback (positive or negative) delivered?

**How are resources (funding and opportunities) allocated* within your department/college/unit?**

- What does this look like in your area?
- What does a new employee need to know?
- How are you connected to this?

* Refer to Our Budget website at twin-cities.umn.edu/our-budget for a quick overview. This would be particularly useful for employees coming from outside the higher education industry.

**How is behavior modeled?**

- Who are the most respected leaders (formal and informal)?
- How do leaders demonstrate ethical behaviors?
- What advice do people give for success?

**In what ways does your organization recognize employee contributions (i.e. rewards, status, etc.)**

- How are staff and faculty recognized for doing a good job?
- What advancement opportunities are there?
A Quick Guide to

Organizational Culture and Onboarding (Cont.)

The self-reflection questions will help you assess where your department, college or unit falls within each of the seven common characteristics of organizational culture:*

1. **Innovation and risk-taking:** how much are employees encouraged to take risks?
2. **Attention to detail:** how much are employees expected to be precise and pay attention to detail?
3. **Outcome orientation:** how much is the focus on results (the “what” of performance) and how much is on the process used (the “how” of performance)?
4. **People orientation:** how much do people consider the effect that actions and decisions will have on people in the organization?
5. **Team orientation:** how much is work organized around teams versus individuals?
6. **Competitiveness:** how competitive and confrontational are people?
7. **Stability:** how much emphasis is on the status quo versus growth?

Consider where your department, college, or unit falls on each of the seven characteristics of organizational culture. Make sure to share real-life examples that bring the culture to life within your organization. For example, when talking about Innovation and Risk Taking, think of a time when someone took a risk and describe what happened. Was it encouraged/appreciated?

Once you have assessed your organizational culture, **share and discuss it with the new employee.** You can start by going over a few characteristics at a time.

Additionally, take a look at the Conversation Guide for New Employee,** which outlines more conversation topics and ideas along with the suggested timelines to ensure the smooth transition of the employee into your team. This guide is intended for your new employee.

**Refer to Conversation Guide for New Employees at XXX for additional ideas on conversation topics during a new employee’s first year.**

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