



## UNDERSTANDING AND INFLUENCING CULTURE - QUICK TIPS

*Culture is a complex social reality that is difficult to change, hard to define, multi-layered, and a major influence of behavior and performance. Leaders must attend to their unit cultures, especially guarding against movement towards toxicity. Cultural intelligence is critical for the leader of an academic unit.*

### Why You Care

- Culture is...
  - “the way things are around here.”
  - “the collective programming of the mind.” - Geert Hofstede.
  - pervasive.
  - difficult to change.
  - influential over the behavior of those within the unit.
- Cultures can be strong or weak, good or bad.
- There is no perfect culture.
- As a leader, you are responsible for the culture of your unit.

#### CULTURE

“The collective programming of the mind.” - Geert Hofstede

### Culture Persistence

- Hiring:
  - People are attracted to people that are like them, known as the “similar to me” effect.
  - Good cultures tend to hire good people.
  - Dysfunctional cultures need intervention to change.
  - Hire carefully!
- New Employee Orientation: Work to assure that the messages and people involved in orientation are sensitive to and focused on getting things started in a positive way.
- Reward Systems:
  - Edmund Burke: “All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing.” Ignoring bad conduct can inadvertently reinforce it.
  - Stephen Kerr: “*On the folly of hoping for A while rewarding B.*” Rewards disjointed from expressed goals are problematic.
  - Academic units that reward solely on scholarly productivity and ignore citizenship can create problems in teaching, service, and citizenship cultures.
- Leadership: Leaders influence culture through hiring, new employee orientation, rewards systems, and their own behavior.

#### LEADERS

are responsible for the culture





## Unit Subcultures

- Subcultures can be a source of conflict.
- Subcultures can form from *any* salient difference.
  - Those who go to the gym at the same time.
  - Shared strong interest in an area.
  - notions that their work is better than others, more impactful, more important to society.
  - Differences in teaching load, tenure status, research method, software choice, journal preferences, etc.
- In a unit with strong subcultures, the strong leader is aware of them and regularly addresses how the differences increase the strength of the unit.

**LEADERS**  
Must recognize and reconcile subcultures

## Changing Unit Culture

- Positive and deliberate culture change begins with a choice to do it, acknowledging that it may be a slow and painful process for many involved.
- Obstacles:
  - Changing the deeply-held values and beliefs about the very identity of the unit is very hard.
  - People are resistant to culture change because it is natural for people to fear the unknown.
  - Unit members can be pessimistic about change because they have witnessed other failed change efforts before.
  - Key members of the unit and even leadership may stand in the way
  - An attitude of “we’ve always done it this way.”
- How to enact culture change:
  - Creating a sense of urgency about change.
  - “Selling” a vision of how much better the unit will be after the change is critical for unit members to “unfreeze” their view of the culture and buy into a change process.
  - Role model the new culture and train unit members to adopt the new behaviors.
  - Visibly represent the culture through rewards, signs, and symbols to reinforce the culture.





## National Culture

Academic units often comprise members from a variety of national cultures. It can be helpful to understand the differences between these cultures, and that that expectations unit members may carry from their acculturation to other ways of doing things in their home country or where their disciplinary education took place.

- **Individualism vs Collectivism:** Collective cultures tend to set aside personal interest in favor of collective well-being more easily than their individualist counterparts.
- **Equality vs Hierarchy (Power Distance):** While some expect differences between power in hierarchical structures and show deference to the people in higher organizational or social positions, others do not have this expectation and feel uncomfortable with it.
- **Universalism vs Particularism:** Universalists seek universal norms and rules to guide behavior. Particularists, on the other hand, admit exceptions to these rules, often based on personal relationship.
- **Direct vs Indirect Communication:** Direct communicators say what they mean, use more definitive language, and rely on body language less than indirect communicators. Indirect communicators obfuscate meaning, and hint at things obliquely.
- **Affective vs Neutral Feelings:** This deals with expressiveness in communication. Affective cultures are very expressive, opt for transparency in communications, use touch and gestures, and often speak quickly and heatedly. Conversely, neutral cultures are guarded with respect to their thoughts and emotions and hold in emotions often to the point of explosion.
- **Public vs Private Space:** Some people prefer a larger “personal space” around them, whereas others prefer a smaller space. Watch for cues like people moving closer to or further from you during conversations.

