What Went Wrong?

- Organization X benchmarks key HR strategies within other similar organizations, yet when implemented, fail to have the same level of effectiveness.

- Another organization implements a competitor’s recruiting tool that produced a significant increase in the quantity and quality of applicants generated, yet sees no similar result.

- A third organization studies key innovations and trends in employee retention, yet, when implemented, does not achieve the positive results seen by others.

Good HR policies and programs are only “good” when they fit with the organization’s unique culture, business objectives, and personality. Authors such as Fitz-enz and Ulrich recently commented that benchmarking is often a poor strategy because what makes internal strategies effective is in their linkage to a company’s culture. When an organization does a good job assessing its culture and climate, it can then go on to establish human resource policies, programs, and strategies that support and strengthen its core purpose and values.

So, how does an organization objectively assess its culture? Much has been written on how culture impacts organizational strategies, policies, and programs. There has been little written, however, on how to assess one’s own culture so that appropriate HR strategies can be developed and implemented effectively.

To assess culture, you must first define what you mean by the term “culture.” There are dozens of different definitions and measures of culture in the literature. Jim Harris, Ph.D. and Joan Brannick, Ph.D., co-authors of the book Finding and Keeping Great Employees (AMACOM, 1999), describe one way of defining culture. According to Harris and Brannick, a company’s culture is defined by its core purpose or core value and companies that successfully attract, hire, and retain top talent, align their recruitment and retention practices with their core culture. They go on to describe four distinct culture categories – Customer Service, Innovation, Operational Excellence, and Spirit.

While this model is an excellent start for linking culture to HR strategy, it does not offer a “how-to” approach for guiding HR professionals in developing an assessment of culture that will be helpful in constructing the HR architecture.

There are many different factors that define an organization’s culture, including the following:

- Degree of hierarchy within the organization
- Degree of urgency
- People/task orientation
- Assertiveness/courtesy dimensions
- Functional orientation
- Institutional “personality” issues
- Values
Each will be discussed here, with some questions that may be helpful in determining where the organization falls on these diverse continuums. As you go through the following areas, check one box in each area that you think best describes your organization.

**Degree of Hierarchy**
The degree of hierarchy is the extent to which the organization values traditional channels of authority and the need to utilize those channels. Some examples of the three distinct levels of hierarchy are as follows:

- **High**: well-defined organizational structure; need to work through channels; value authority
- **Moderate**: defined structure but often work around channels
- **Low**: matrix organization; loosely defined job descriptions; challenge authority

An organization with a high level of hierarchy tends to be more formal and tends to move slower than organizations with a low level of hierarchy.

**Degree of Urgency**
The degree of urgency defines how quickly the organization wants or needs to push decision-making and innovation. Some organizations choose their positioning; others have it thrust upon them given the competitive nature of their marketplace, product reliance on trends and fashion, and responsiveness of other markets. Some examples of the levels of urgency are outlined here:

- **High**: need to push projects through quickly; high need to respond to changing marketplace
- **Moderate**: move projects at reasonable pace
- **Low**: work slowly and consistently; quality valued over efficiency

An organization with a high level of urgency tends to be fast-paced and tends to support a decisive management style. An organization with a low level of urgency tends to be more methodical and tends to support a more thoughtful and considered management style.

**People/Task Orientation**
The orientation of people versus tasks has been discussed in management style literature, yet a dominant culture usually exists within organizations. Again, organizations may choose their people/task orientation; others may opt for their orientation based upon the nature of their industry, historical issues, or operational processes. The three dimensions are as follows:

- People over tasks
- Equal value for people and tasks
- Tasks over people

An organization with a strong people orientation tends to put people first when making decisions. These companies believe that people drive organization performance and productivity. An organization with a strong task orientation tends to tasks and processes first when making decisions. These companies believe that concepts such as efficiency and quality drive organization performance and productivity.

**Functional Orientation**
Every organization puts an emphasis or priority on certain functional areas. An innovation organization known for its Research and Development may certainly have at its core a functional orientation for that area. A hospitality company may focus on Operations, or on Service, depending upon its historical choices and its definition in the marketplace. Functional orientations may include:

- Marketing
- Operations
- Research and Development
- Engineering
- Service
- Other

Employees from different functions in the company may think that their functional area is the one that drives the company. The important thing to get a handle on is what do the majority of employees perceive to be the company’s functional orientation.
Organizational Personality/Slogan
How is your organization known to others? How would you and others characterize the organization? Are you known for a family-friendly environment? Are you seen as a sweatshop? Is quality always the top priority?
Consider this listing:

“Work hard, play hard.”
“Steamroller.”
“We’re a team.”
“We’re a family.”
“First to market.”
“Quality first.”
“Family first.”
“Innovation takes time.”
“Survivalist.”
“The customer is always right.”
“The customer comes second.”

Values
What do you value as an organization? What does your organization feel to be its most important quality?
Consider the following:
- Efficiency
- Customer Service
- Fun
- Hospitality
- Leading Edge
- State-of-the-art

Examining what behaviors get rewarded and punished in your organization is often a great way to determine what the organization values.

How To Assess Your Organization's Culture
Once you’ve outlined the key dimensions, how can you assess your culture? Here are some ideas for determining what dimensions characterize your organization as an institution.

Give yourself a quiz. Take out your pencil and check the boxes that you believe define your organization. Are there other issues not outlined here that are important in

If you have a slogan that reflects your mission, vision, or values, look closely at the wording. It may offer some clues as to your organizational personality or theme. Be careful, however, in using your slogan as the driver for determining your organizational personality. Often times, a company’s slogan or mission statement better represents what they want to be rather than who they actually are.

Whatever strategy you use to assess your organizational culture, the process must be honest, thorough, and must focus not on “what we want to be” as much as “who we are right now.”
defining “who we are,” “what we do,” and “how we do it.” Would others agree with your answers?

Give the quiz to managers and business leaders. Let your leadership assess where your organization ranks. Discuss areas of agreement and disagreement. What may be true within one department or facility may not be true of the organization as a whole.

Conduct focus groups with employees or customers. Just because top management leaders agree on “what we’re about” doesn’t mean that rank-and-file employees see it that way. Your leaders may see you as a service-driven organization, which may be true of your external positioning, but may not be true in how you respond to employee needs and concerns.

Strategize at a retreat, business planning session, or at staff meetings. Hold meetings around the issue, “Who are we?” and “What makes us who we are?” Continue with these discussions until some consensus is developed around key issues.

Whatever strategy you use to assess your organizational culture, the process must be honest, thorough, and must focus not on “what we want to be” as much as “who we are right now.” Organizations who decide that “where we are now” is not “where we want to be,” may also want to look at moving their organization to embrace a different culture prior to initiating new policies and programs to support the existing culture.

Assessing your organizational culture is the first and most important step in developing sound HR strategies that support your business objectives and goals. Alignment of business plans and organizational culture is a fundamental method of ensuring that the organization will be able to meet and exceed its goals through strategies that support those objectives. Further, by ensuring that the organization is not merely copying “best practices” from other organizations, they are more likely to develop policies and programs that will lead the organization toward its goals. In other words, organizations, to be effective, must copy how leading companies think, not by copying what they do.

By better understanding who you are, you’ll be better able to implement smart policies and programs that will sustain your organization’s character.

About the authors: Catherine Fyock, CSP, SPHR, is the author of Get The Best, and is a faculty member for SHRM’s Recruitment and Retention Certificate Program. Joan Brannick, Ph.D. is the author of Hiring@NetSpeed (NetSpeed Books, 2001) and co-author of Finding and Keeping Great Employees (AMACOM, 1999), a Fortune Magazine “Best Business Book.”

Cathy Fyock, CSP, SPHR, is an employment strategist, helping organizations recruit and retain employees in a volatile labor market. She can be reached at cathy@cathyfyock.com, or toll-free at 1 (800) 277-0384.