

How we do things around here

Penny Walker examines some of the different ways to think about the culture of your organisation

Organisational culture is an invisible force that can blow you off course or put the wind in your sails. It is there – whether you can see it or not – and if you’re not succeeding with your sustainability efforts, perhaps it is the organisational culture that is the problem.

Understanding organisational culture

In his book *Organisational culture and leadership*, Edgar Schein defines organisational culture as the “pattern of shared basic assumptions”. He says that these influence how people in an organisation behave and how they make sense of the world. That is why organisational culture is often described as: “the way we do things around here”.

Initially, the basic assumptions of the founder and the early leaders of an organisation set its culture. The choices they make early on underpin and colour everything that comes after – at least, they do if those choices lead to the organisation’s success and survival. For example, do they work silently in an office with the door shut, or does “work” take place in noisy debate? If there is a choice between opportunities that make the most money and others that are interesting, pioneering or socially valuable, which path does the organisation follow? What is considered long term – a week, a month, one year or 10 years?

Organisational culture – that is, assumptions about what the world is like, what the organisation is like and how the two interact – is also created and revealed at moments of crisis. If income drops, do people get laid off or reduce their hours of work? Is communication with the outside world open or defensive? Is the unexpected greeted by research with customers, stakeholders and benchmarking, or is the response to look to internal experts, first principles and core ethics?

The specifics of an organisation’s culture will also be influenced by the wider national culture and by the sector it operates in – engineering, law, campaigning, regulation or retail, for example.



As the organisation grows and new people come in, they either adopt the culture and thrive or stay uncomfortably and then leave.

As long as the organisation continues to function well enough internally and succeeds sufficiently to survive, the original culture will persist. As the organisation changes from a start-up to an established institution, the culture may shift further. Subcultures may arise related to people’s places in the hierarchy or their basic job – customer- or user-facing, design or management, for example.

If organisational culture, including subcultures, is a pattern of shared basic assumptions, what is the nature of these assumptions? According to Schein, the basic underlying assumptions will be about:

- **The nature of time** – what constitutes long term and short term? Is time linear or cyclical? Can time be “used” or “wasted”? How controllable is time?
- **The nature of space** – what does it mean to “have” space? How much is enough? How is it allocated?
- **The nature of reality and truth** – how do we know something is real or true? Is it through argument, evidence, gut feeling or by listening to an expert?
- **Human nature** – what is good or bad? Can people change? Should we motivate or control? Can someone’s essence be seen in what they achieve or who they are?
- **Human relationships** – are we basically cooperative or competitive? Do we value respect or intimacy? Are we concerned primarily about the group or the individual?



William Bridges, in his book *The character of organisations*, applies the same underlying theory as

the famous Myers-Briggs personality type indicator to describe what these shared assumptions might consist of. They include:

- **extraversion or introversion** – primarily oriented towards markets, competitors, regulators and stakeholders; or primarily oriented towards its own vision, competences and culture;
- **sensing or intuition** – in this context sensing means gathering information about details and the “here and now”; intuition focuses on the future, the big picture and the possibilities;
- **thinking or feeling** – decisions are made based on consistency, efficiency and in an impersonal way; or based on individuality, creativity and the common good; and
- **judging or perceiving** – judging organisations reach clear, firm decisions with definitions and closure; perceiving ones keep their options open.

An organisation's culture need not be at the extreme of any of these pairs. What you look for is the broad preference. Bridges' approach provides 16 categories that an organisation might fall into, while Schein's is more open-ended. The latter deliberately resists creating a list of “types” of organisational culture.

What difference does culture make?

Whether you call them basic assumptions or character, the things that make up organisational culture can be profoundly influential on what is done and how.

For example, a judging organisation would rather tie down the budget for a small onsite renewable energy project it can deliver on its own, than leave it open while

it waits for the results of discussions with other nearby organisations – even if this means missing out on the chance to achieve much better overall results.

In an organisational culture that assumes that you discover the truth through debate, the sustainability strategy will be developed through workshops and various committees until it is signed off at the top. If the culture assumes the truth is “out there” waiting to be discovered, the strategy will be based on benchmarking and an analysis of external drivers, written by a small group of experts and supported by referenced evidence.

What's the culture of my organisation?

The problem is that underlying culture is so embedded, and feels so non-negotiable to the people who share it, that it can be difficult to perceive clearly.

You can turn understanding organisational culture into your life's work. Tempting as that may sound, there are some short cuts. Bridges' book contains a questionnaire, while Schein's includes a design for a one-day workshop. Either can be a great place to look for a method of diagnosing the current culture.

Meanwhile, there are some places where organisational culture reveals itself. If someone is new to the organisation, they will not yet have learned the culture. Perhaps they will stick out a bit – saying things that do not fit or doing their job exactly as suggested by the company guidance, rather than in the spirit of the culture. By noticing these mismatches, you will get some clues about your organisation's culture.

Other places to look are the discrepancies between what people say the organisation does (its stated priorities or values) and what it ends up doing in practice (because the unspoken underlying assumptions are so strong). For example, a retailer might promote equality and diversity in its workforce, but market its science kits at “boys” and its cookery kits at “girls”. Exploring this discrepancy might uncover a basic underlying assumption about intrinsic differences between genders. But do not take this for granted: the assumption may be something quite different – for example, that you have to sell what you think the market will buy rather than shift the market.

Interpreting the “artefacts” of culture – observable actions and physical objects – is not straightforward, and Schein recommends a workshop carries out the analysis rather than leave it to one person, however expert.

Culture and sustainability

Organisational culture can be a tailwind or it can push you on to the rocks. If your organisation's environmental performance is already as good as you want it to be, you may not need to study its culture in any great detail. But if your well-crafted sustainability plans seem to be adrift or in choppy waters, it is worth understanding your organisation's culture better so that you can harness it.

Penny Walker is an independent sustainability consultant. Read her blogs at penny-walker.co.uk/blog. In a forthcoming article she will focus on how you can harness your organisation's culture to drive change and ask whether you should ever try to change a company's culture.