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**Is Your Culture
Aligned with
Diversity?**



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Is Your Culture Aligned with Diversity?

By Peter Linkow

Linkow describes diversity as behaviors that require a hospitable environment. Before launching a diversity initiative, each organization must determine whether its culture offers an environment conducive to diversity; if not, either the culture or the diversity strategy or both must be changed.

Diversity is a series of behaviors—modes of thinking, acting, and working—that, like orchids, thrive only in a hospitable environment. Since culture is a primary determinant of the environment in an organization, before embarking on a diversity initiative (or at least early in the voyage) an organization must determine whether its culture offers an environment that is conducive to diversity. If not, either the culture or the diversity strategy or both must be changed.

What is a diversity culture?

Marvin Bower, former managing director of McKinsey and Company, aptly defined culture as “the way we do things around here.”¹ More formally, culture is the values and beliefs that most members of an organization share. Beliefs are assumptions about what is true, while values are assumptions about what is worthwhile or desirable.

An organization with a true culture of diversity and inclusion has clear values and beliefs that foster desirable diversity behavior. It relentlessly manages every aspect of its work environment to support those values and beliefs.

Fifty organizations recognized for their diversity initiatives shared seven core diversity values and beliefs:

- 1. COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE.** Organizations that achieve a significant level of diversity will enjoy a competitive advantage in the marketplace.
- 2. PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY.** Employees should be free from harassment, discrimination, and intolerance, and free to speak up without fear of reprisal.
- 3. VALUE DIFFERENCES/FOSTER INCLUSION.** All differences should be respected and valued. An organization will achieve superior outcomes when it effectively embraces a wide range of different cultures, perspectives, thought processes, assumptions and beliefs.
- 4. ADVANCEMENT THROUGH MERIT.** All recruitment, employment, development, promotion and compensation decisions should be made purely on the basis of objective merit.
- 5. REFLECT CUSTOMERS AND COMMUNITIES.** The practices and demographics of the organization should mirror the practices and demographics of its customers and communities.
- 6. VALUE CHAIN DIVERSITY.** All suppliers throughout the value chain should demonstrate diversity success.
- 7. THE RIGHT THING.** Taking action in the interest of diversity is morally correct.



Cultural media

Values and beliefs must be transmitted before they can affect behavior. Three primary mechanisms transmit culture throughout the organization and affect individual and group behavior: heroes; myths and artifacts; and rites and rituals.

HEROES transmit the culture and affect behavior by modeling behaviors that succeed in an organization. They personify the fundamental values and beliefs the organization seeks. One senior leader became a hero when he uncharacteristically overruled a manager to enable a

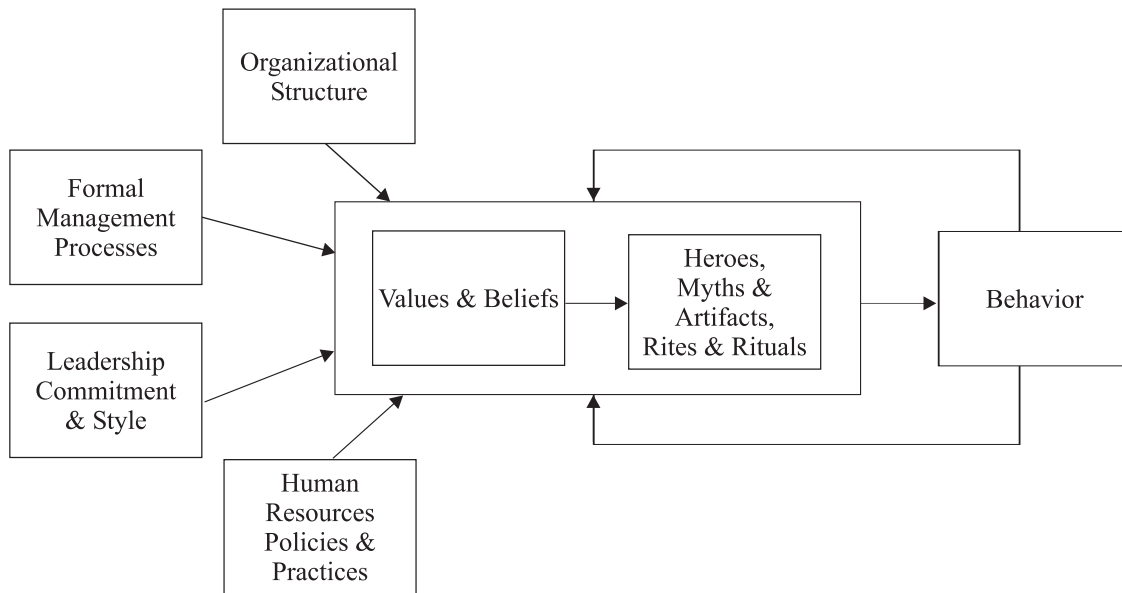
high-performing employee to take advantage of a flexible work option.

MYTHS communicate the history of the organization through words. Occasionally fictitious, they emphasize the organization's critical values and beliefs. One story frequently retold at a leading company depicts a team, composed of white men, converging on a client site only to find that group composed of people of color. The client leader told the company's team to come back when they could more adequately reflect the makeup of the client organization.

ARTIFACTS are objects—like buildings, tools, and written materials—that communicate the history of the organization. At IBM, for example, a policy letter on equal opportunity, written in 1953 by Thomas J. Watson, Jr., former Chairman and CEO, is a frequently cited, highly revered document.

RITES AND RITUALS express values and beliefs through action. They describe the work environment and how work gets done. Rites and rituals have been described as the 'dance of culture'. For example, a company that has a carefully defined process for objectively evaluating every employee and that adheres invariably

Figure 1: How Culture Shapes Behavior



to that process sends a strong message about merit.

Strength of the culture

Strong cultures have a greater impact on behavior than weak cultures. Vijay Sathe², professor at the Drucker School of Management, says two features of the culture help determine its strength:

- **EXTENT OF SHARING.** Organizations with values that are more widely shared among their members have stronger cultures. To foster commitment to shared values, IBM created its values over a period of 72 hours through a highly inclusive, on-line, commitment-building process called a ‘values jam’, which was open to all 319,000 employees; “tens of thousands” participated in the process.

- **CLARITY OF ORDERING.** In strong cultures, members have more clarity about the relative importance of various values and beliefs. IBM CEO Sam Palmisano has been unequivocally clear and focused about values priorities at IBM: dedication to every client’s success; innovation that matters, for the company and for the world; trust and personal responsibility in all relationships.

Management system variables

Culture is not the only organizational variable that affects behavior (Figure 1). Management system variables that work in concert with culture to shape behavior include formal management processes (e.g., measurement, planning, and budgeting); leadership com-

mitment and style; human resources policies and processes (e.g., performance management and total rewards); and organizational structure.

An initiative to support diversity values and beliefs might not have the desired effect on behavior if it is contradicted by management system variables. For example, if the performance management process is inconsistently applied, advancement through merit is unlikely. Behavior also shapes the culture in a never-ending chicken-and-egg process.

The refractive effect culture has on management systems variables is analogous to the experience of reaching into water for a bar of soap and not finding it where it appeared to be: variables are altered as they are filtered through the culture before they affect behavior. Beware—culture may

Figure 2: Diversity Culture Matrix

Cultural Media	Current Culture Examples	Diversity Values & Beliefs							Symbols
		Competitive Advantage	Psychological Safety	Value Differences/Foster Inclusion	Advancement through Merit	Reflect Customers & Communities	Value Chain Diversity	The Right Thing	
Heroes									◎ = highly correlated ○ = correlated △ = negatively correlated
Myths and Artifacts									
Rites and Rituals									
Strength of Culture									◎ = strong ○ = moderate △ = weak
Extent of Sharing									
Clarity of Ordering									

divert the impact of management actions away from the behaviors you thought you were getting.

Matrix for evaluating cultural alignment

The diversity culture matrix tool (Figure 2) helps to determine whether your culture is ready for diversity. The tool is useful whether the organization is embarking on a new diversity strategy, or not achieving desired results from an ongoing strategy.

The matrix includes five steps: describe the current culture; establish core diversity values and beliefs; correlate core values and beliefs with the current culture; determine the

strength of the current culture; and analyze the results and identify targets for cultural change.

Top management should be involved in the culture assessment and change process. At best, top management should complete the tool with the guidance of an experienced facilitator; at minimum, top management must agree upon core diversity values, sign off on the targets for cultural change, and champion the cultural change process.



Figure 3: Diversity Culture Matrix for “Cyblex”

Cultural Media		Current Culture Examples	Diversity Values & Beliefs							Symbols
			Competitive Advantage	Psychological Safety	Value Differences Foster Inclusion	Advancement through Merit	Reflect Customers & Communities	Value Chain Diversity	The Right Thing	
Heroes	Employee team that worked three days without sleep to meet production requirements of customer			△					◎ = highly correlated ○ = correlated △ = negatively correlated	
	Caucasian sales manager in Japan who refused a promotion to Director of Sales for Japan because he felt a Japanese person should hold the position	○	○	○		◎		○		
	More senior manager rehired a female employee who had been dismissed for leaving a meeting to pick up a sick child at daycare		◎	○				◎		
Myths and Artifacts	Virtually everyone has the company’s 5 business goals on their wall and one of the goals is Diversity and Inclusion	◎		○						
	Many employees have family pictures on their desktops that include their spouse; the several gay and Lesbian employees have pictures of their children but not their same sex partners		△	△						
	The highly successful Division President, who when asked the rationale for a decision responded, “Because I said so.”		△	△				△		
Rites and Rituals	During performance appraisals, feedback is brutally direct; no punches are pulled		△		◎	○				
	At business unit reviews, extensive time is devoted to the number of women and minorities at all organizational levels versus U.S. Department of Labor averages			◎	△	◎		◎		
	Extremely intensive, team-based job interview process before any manager or professional is hired	○	△		○					
Strength of Culture										
Extent of Sharing		◎	△	○	◎	△	△	○	◎ = strong ○ = moderate	
Clarity of Ordering		◎	△	△	◎	○	△	○	△ = weak	

STEP 1: DESCRIBE THE CURRENT CULTURE

For each of the cultural media—heroes, myths and artifacts, and rites and rituals—identify as many current examples as possible from the organization. This can be done through small-group brainstorming or by interviewing. Ideally, participants should represent all levels and functions of the organization. Do not be concerned about which category an example fits; for example, many myths are about heroes.

STEP 2: ESTABLISH CORE DIVERSITY VALUES AND BELIEFS

Many organizations have already defined their diversity values and beliefs or will want to create their own. In any case, top management

should have final approval. Values and beliefs should be collectively exhaustive—no other values and beliefs should be required to fully describe diversity. They should also be mutually exclusive: to the greatest degree possible, they should not overlap with each other.

STEP 3: CORRELATE CORE VALUES AND BELIEFS WITH THE CURRENT CULTURE

For each current culture example, determine whether it is highly correlated, correlated, or negatively correlated with each core value or belief by placing the appropriate symbol in the square. If there is no relationship, leave the box blank. For easy visualization of results, you can use symbols rather than numbers, as in the sample figures.

STEP 4: DETERMINE THE STRENGTH OF THE CURRENT CULTURE

For each core value or belief, determine whether the extent of sharing and clarity of ordering indicates a strong, moderate, or weak culture. (Use the same symbols you used for Step 3.)

STEP 5: IDENTIFY TARGETS FOR CULTURAL CHANGE

Identifying targets for cultural change is a relatively simple matter once the other steps have been completed. By reading down each core value or belief, you can determine the correlation between the core value/belief and the current value. Then, the strength of the culture can be established. If the correlation is negative or nonexistent,



An initiative to support the seven core diversity values and beliefs might not have the desired effect on behavior if it is contradicted by management system variables. At minimum, top management must agree upon core diversity values, sign off on the targets for cultural change, and champion the cultural change process.

or the strength of the culture is low for a particular value or belief, that value should become a target for cultural change.

Figure 3 illustrates how a company can use the diversity culture matrix to identify its targets.

'Cyblex' is a hypothetical medium-sized technology company that makes automated language translation systems, most of which are purchased by women. Cyblex is strong on diversity as a competitive advantage, even including diversity among its business goals. There are strong corporate messages about the value of mirroring customers—not apparently shared by employees. Although there are examples of heroic individuals, the culture at Cyblex does not convey psychological safety. Valuing differences and fostering inclusion are somewhat ambiguous, while merit and doing the right

thing appear to be strong in the culture. There is no message at all about value chain diversity. Cyblex should first strengthen safety and valuing differences and inclusion, then enhance value chain diversity.

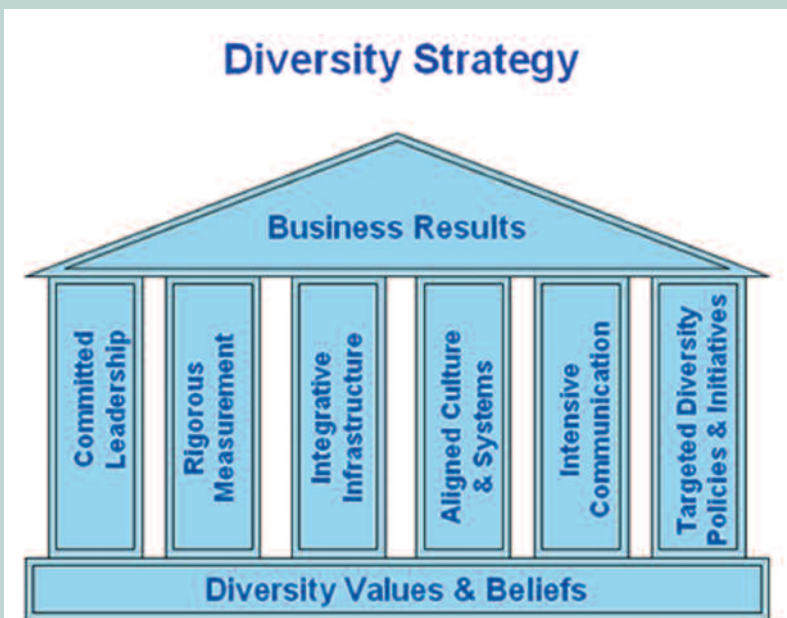
Ultimately, the need for a cultural change is a judgment call. Step 5, identifying targets for cultural change, is most effective when done as a group. The critical question to address is, "What does the diversity culture matrix communicate to you?" A seasoned facilitator can help lead the group to a consensus on interpretation and priorities for action.

Getting Started

To initiate development of a culture of diversity, leaders may want to make a few bold changes to symbolize the new culture. For example, one senior leader unequivocally rebuked an employee for making a racially derogatory remark; by the end of that

afternoon, the whole company had received a strong message on psychological safety. Another leader delivered the diversity business case to every employee, a handful at a time; e-mails back to HR indicated that employees had gotten the message about diversity as a competitive advantage. Use the organization's particular management system variables—organizational structure, formal management processes, leadership commitment/style, and HR policies/practices—to move the culture toward diversity and check for a consistent message across systems.

In the long run, implementing a diversity culture often requires significant cultural change and must be implemented like any transformation³. Changing and then maintaining a culture is by no means easy or certain. Nevertheless, cultural development is essential to diversity success.



At WFD we partner with diversity officers to create strategies—built on a foundation of shared values and beliefs—that win top management’s highest commitment and drive business results.

WFD builds a diversity strategy on six pillars that drive organizational change and align diversity values and beliefs with business goals.

ARTICLE NOTES:

¹Terrence E. Deal and Allen A. Kennedy. *Corporate Cultures: The Rites and Rituals of Corporate Life* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1982), p.4.

²Vijay Sathe. *Culture and Related Corporate Realities* (Homewood, IL: Richard D. Irwin, Inc., 1985), p.15.

³Harrison M. Trice and Janice M. Beyer. "Using Six Organizational Rites to Change Culture," in *Gaining Control of the Corporate Culture*, Killman, Saxton, Serpa, and Associates, editors (San Francisco, CA: Josey-Bass, 1985), p. 371.



At WFD Consulting we partner with our clients to create inspiring work environments where businesses succeed and employees thrive. Our research, consulting, and implementation services enable our clients to mobilize the full richness, diversity, and potential of their employees, resulting in a more resilient, productive, and engaged workforce. We achieve distinction through dedication to client needs, collaboration, innovation, and a focus on action that set the standard for our field.

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