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## Hidden symbols in your workplace

by | 09 Nov 2011

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A useful starting point is to review both the overt signs (such as organisational and financial performance, quality, health and safety, absenteeism, turnover, employee engagement survey scores) in conjunction with the 'hidden symbols'. Together, these can provide a powerful insight into the culture of the organisation - and a starting point for what should be celebrated and retained and what might be changed.

Organisations often have a desire to change the culture in their business - sometimes as a result of poor performance, poor employee engagement scores or sometimes just due to a gut feeling that things either aren't right or could be better.

This cultural revival sometimes means a review of the organisation's mission statement or values - and can be accompanied by a launch showing 'how things are going to be different around here from now on'. Whilst mission statements and stated values are important; on their own they are unlikely to do much to change the culture of an organisation.

A useful model to check for hidden symbols is 'Johnson's Cultural Web', who suggests six elements to consider:

**Stories** - What stories are told about past events and people? These can say a great deal about what is valued. It can also affect ongoing reputations, as these same war stories are likely to be repeated outside of the workplace.

**Rituals and Routines** - The daily behaviour and actions of people that signal acceptable behaviour for the organisation. This indicates what is expected to happen in a given situation, and what is valued by management. This is often where a disconnect occurs between the stated values of the organisation and the reality observed by employees, or the written policy and what actually happens.

**Symbols** - The visual representations of an organisation including who wears a uniform, who receives offices (and how plush they are), who receives a parking space and where, the formal or informal dress codes. How up to date and professional are noticeboards and notices? How clean and functional are staff amenities?

**Organisational Structure** - This includes both the formal structure as written on the organisational chart, but as important - who wields the informal power and

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influence and who is most valued (irrespective of the formal org chart)

**Control Systems** - The ways that the organisation is controlled. These include financial systems, quality systems, and rewards (including the way they are measured and distributed within the organization.)

**Power Structures** - The pockets of real power in the company. This may involve one or two key senior executives, a whole group of executives, or even a department. The key is that these people have the greatest amount of influence on decisions, operations, and strategic direction.

The review of the hidden symbols is most effective when undertaken by an impartial observer who can look for and at symbols with fresh eyes. Focus groups and one on one interviews with employees, managers and the leadership team can provide a rich source of information on the 'real' values, rituals and stories that can define an organization. Read in conjunction with quantitative data, the two sources can paint a very real picture of 'the way things are done around here'.

The results are often surprising and can provide unexpected aspects of the culture to celebrate and emphasise. Almost always, the results provide a more real and true result of what the organization is about - good, bad and indifferent; a vital starting point for moving forward with any cultural review.

**About the author**

*Tammy Tansley is the principal of Tammy Tansley Consulting, a boutique HR Consultancy specialising in workplace relations, change and organisational design to enable positive workplace change and performance.*

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**COMMENTS**

by Nicole | 11/11/2011 8:06:46 PM

Since I first came across this model, I have been more cognisant of these hidden elements of an organisational culture and they inform how I present my current company, for example, to external parties. But I wonder if many companies undertake such analysis?

by Lee | 14/11/2011 5:55:56 PM

I think organisations derive direction and energy from both formal and informal culture. I also believe organisations pay attention to the formal symbols, rituals, structures but often aren't aware of and/or try to influence the informal cultural elements. Drawing on the iceberg principle, the formal is often only the veritable tip and the informal the mass and hidden bulk of the cultural influence.

by Tammy Tansley | 15/11/2011 10:07:16 PM

Lee/Nicole - I think often it is about awareness - open that door and organisations see culture in a completely different light.. Sometimes, it is about denial! And sometimes it is about the degree to which culture is perceived to be important (and therefore demanding of time and attention). Thanks for continuing the discussion.

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