By Anthony Klarica – Elite Performance, Six-Star Wellbeing & Engagement Survey

Organisational Culture

"What matters most should never be at the mercy of what matters least" Goethe

While applicable to many contexts, the above quote credited to Goethe encapsulates organisational culture succinctly. I often think the challenge for many leaders and organisations is being able to work out the difference between the "most" and the "least".

I recently had a coffee with a colleague who was embarking on a new work journey following their resignation. Their former organisation had lost its way. Transactional leadership styles had infiltrated senior management. People in leadership positions were dictating that family, personal life and time away from the office should not be entertained at the expense of promotion and long hours. In turn performance declined. The culture, by default had become toxic.

The above example is one probable reason why the days of viewing deliberate culture development and maintenance as an optional soft skill is outdated. It highlights that a focus on people and culture is vital for individuals and the nourishment of an organisation. Strong leaders build and nurture culture as a priority. Such leaders appreciate and recognise culture as a foundation for people and performance.

Culture Definitions

I like to view culture informally as the "personality" of an organisation: whether it is a corporate, education, sport, not-for-profit or government organisation. Culture can also reflect what an organisation stands for, what matters most or a chosen identity. Culture is often viewed as a shared pattern of behaviours, beliefs or values that are understood by organisation members and impact a wide range of factors such as creativity, learning, thinking or decisions.

More formally, culture has been defined as "the social and psychological environment that maximises individual and team ability to achieve success" (1). It has also been described as "a shared pattern of assumptions that guide standards and expectations in performance and behaviour" (2). Ideally, culture should be strong enough to guide thinking, decisions and behaviour.

Some of the components of a culture from a structural perspective can include a vision, a mission statement, values, purpose, priorities and behaviours. The different terminology used when reflecting on or building a culture can make it seem confusing. In reality there are many different ways to define and encompass culture. The important thing is that organisations are clear on what they are building and the language or narrative around it. Good cultures are also established on processes being integrated into organisation structures, communication and operations.

While the above describe a framework of culture, achieving or creating such an environment can be difficult. A study of 365 organisations across Europe, Asia and North America identified that 68% of leaders believed that culture is a source of competitive advantage. However, 65% felt they needed to change their culture. Of the leaders surveyed 81% also believed that an organisation that lacks a high performance culture is doomed to mediocrity. Interestingly, the study identified that fewer than 10% of organisations succeed in building a high performance culture. (3)

Culture Examples

To gain a greater insight into culture from a practical level, I have compiled some examples of cultures that organisations have designed and promote publicly. Indeed, having something written in a document, on a website or on a wall-poster, is very different than genuinely living it. But the small compilation below is an insight to some proactive work. All of the examples are readily available to be viewed on public platforms.

FC Barcelona

You don't build a sporting organisation with an estimated value of over $4 billion on a shallow foundation. "Mes Que Un Club" meaning "More than a club" is at the forefront of Barcelona's culture. Their website reads that "we are more than a team of great stars, we are more than a stadium full of dreams, we are more than the goals we've scored and more than the trophies we've won throughout our history". (4)

Specific components that they describe make it More than a club include their membership base, their own style, their involvement in more sports than only football/soccer, their values, the city of Barcelona and their school for life (including La Masia: The Farmhouse" where personal and professional development over an extended period of time occurs).

The five principal values that "describe the spirit of Barcelona" are:

- Humility
- Ambition
- Effort
- Teamwork
- Respect

Each value is described in more detail and overall, the values are deemed to be just as important as winning. (4)

Atlassian

Atlassian is an Australian software company that started in 2002 and is now valued at over $1 billion dollars. The company website states that Atlassian's mission is "to help unleash the potential of every team". (5)

Their five core values were established in 2007, as described in their company time-line. They are identified as "guiding what we do, why we create, and who we hire." (5) In addition, they outline that "our unique values describe at the most fundamental level, what we stand for. These five values shape our culture, influence who we are, what we do, and even who we hire. They're hardwired into our DNA and will stay the same as we continue to grow". (5) The values are:

- Open company, no bullshit
- Build everything with heart and balance
- Don't #@!% the customer
- Play as a team
- Be the change you seek

Each of the values is described in more detail on the website. It reflects that there are many ways to think about and build your culture.

Carlton AFL team

One of my recent projects was to assist the Carlton Australian Rules Football Club re-build their culture. Part of the brief was to align the men's football program, with the administrative team and the new women's team that launched in 2017. It is a challenge to align very different operational aspects of an organisation. This was achieved with establishing consistent values across the organisation with specific behaviours created for specific components of the organisation. A recognition and appreciation of the rich history was required to be balanced with a plan for the future in the build.

Values and behaviours were developed and embedded within the organisation through education that was integrated into player, coach and staff programs on a consistent basis.
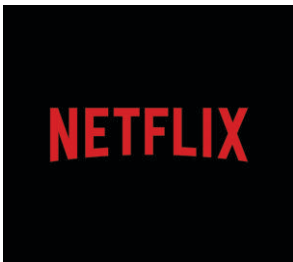
The vision of the club is to be a leader in Australian sport reflected by performance, people and community. More detail is defined within each of these components.

There are 4 key values:

- Bound by Blue
- Brutal Blues
- True Blue
- Blue Skies

Each value has behaviours associated with them that are described on the website. (6)

Netflix

Netflix, through their CEO Reed Hastings have made a commitment to have a strong emphasis on culture. As an organisation they have had rapid growth and expansion and now have over 6,000 employees. Forbes, in an interesting reflection about the Netflix culture describe that Hastings feels that company culture is the only sustainable competitive advantage he has complete control over, and he is smart enough to have it defined and has invested in building the Netflix culture into a major asset of the business. (7)

On their website Netflix have a detailed description about their culture. (8) They state that "we strive to hire the best and we value integrity, excellence, respect, inclusion and collaboration." They add that what is special about Netflix is:

1. Encourage independent decision making by employees
2. Share information openly, broadly and deliberately
3. Are extraordinarily candid with each other
4. Keep only our highly effective people
5. Avoid rules

They define their values in depth, but in summary they are:

- Judgement
- Communication
- Curiosity
- Courage
- Passion
- Selflessness
- Innovation
- Inclusion
- Integrity
- Impact

The above examples are only four of many that could have been described. It is possible to glean from the examples the variety of different ways that a culture can begin to be established from a planning perspective. What is important is deliberate design and commitment. Living the culture, after it has formally been developed is in reality the crucial step.

Living Culture

There are many ways that organisations can live their culture. Naturally, it depends on the nuances of the organisation. Here are just a few thoughts:

Clarity of what the culture is to all members of the organisation
Be clear on how you build, structure and review your culture. This can include the headings used, language used, who is involved in development and how it is presented to staff internally and to external stakeholders.

Leaders live, model and lead culture
While every single person in an organisation influences culture and all staff are responsible for culture, ultimately, it is the leaders of an organisation that have the most influence on how the culture is presented, lived and emphasised. A critical component to this is how leaders build culture into processes and how much they value culture itself.

Clarity of what is expected through clear values and behaviours described
Many staff can be annoyed at posters on walls describing culture that is not lived, or too abstract to live. Ensure that culture includes understandable values and behaviours that are relevant and applicable to the organisation and individuals understand how the culture applies to them. Part of this is to be clear on how culture is integrated into the organisation, how it is reinforced and how people are held accountable to culture.

Coaching and celebrating culture on a regular basis to reinforce behaviours
Develop individual, small team and larger group education related culture. Consider integrating culture reflection into formal performance reviews as well as informal conversations. Ideally culture is integrated into language, narrative and stories within an organisation.

Describe and display
Articulate the culture so that it is able to be understood by members. In addition, ensure that it is able to be seen both internally and externally. Determine as an organisation what is displayed, how it is displayed, where it is displayed and what stories are shared to exemplify culture.

Integrate into processes
At interviews assess cultural fit. Include cultural education through induction including examples of the impact of culture on staff, customers and processes. Create opportunities to celebrate and share stories about successes and challenges related to culture across the organisation. Staff and team meetings can include reflection on culture. Exit interviews can also be opportunities to obtain feedback on culture. In addition, consider if any staff are formally charged with maintaining culture, such as Human Resources, Executive Team Members, Team Leaders, Wellbeing Co-ordinators or any other staff.

**Monitoring and evolving culture with data and measurement**

A recent growth area related to culture is cultural analytics. Culture can be assessed quantitatively either by directly rating specific elements of the culture, or indirectly assessing aspects related to culture, such as wellbeing, engagement and general culture. There are many benefits to utilising data to reflect on culture including recognising strengths and development areas, maintaining accountability and balancing qualitative reflection or impressions about culture with real data. See below for more detail on culture and data.

Be aware of challenges to culture

There are many challenges to building and living a culture. Some challenges include:

- **Environmental, geographical or size:** Having all staff contained in one location can assist leading and building culture. Multiple sites in different locations or even countries can dilute capacity to monitor and reinforce culture. Having 25,000 staff, as compared to 250 also poses obvious challenges.

- **Change:** Changes to leadership, organisation direction and staff turnover can all potentially dilute culture without on-going commitment and maintenance.

- **Commitment:** Effective cultures maintain commitment to their culture and strive to retain staff who live the culture, as well as part ways with staff who overtly sabotage or are in conflict with the organisation's culture.

Data & Culture
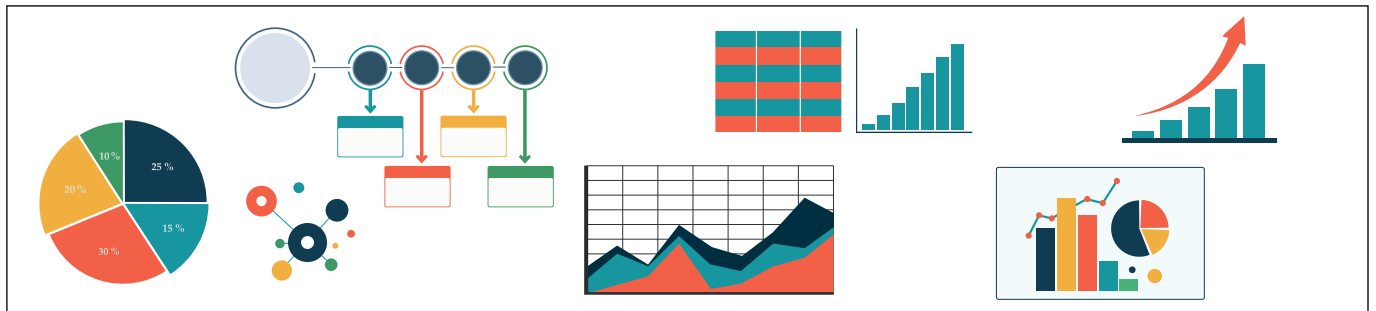
There have been some recent excellent reflections and discussion on "cultural analytics" or "data informed practice" for corporate and education organisations (9) (10) (11). Cultural analytics can provide insight into how well an organisation is tracking with regard to living their culture and achieving objectives. Insight to strengths and development areas and where to direct resources or energy are important for leaders to manage and maintain culture, similar to other aspects of organisation performance.

Figure 1
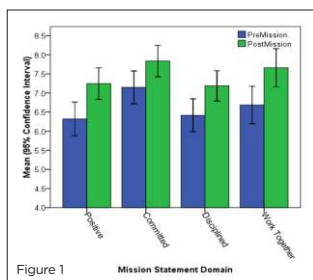
As mentioned above, there are different ways to use data to review culture. This includes people directly rating specific values or behaviours of themselves, colleagues or the organisation. For example, if positive and working together are two values with well-defined behaviours, establish processes for these to be rated. See the example (Figure 1.) of a school, with 63 students from grade 5 to year 12, where I consulted on a culture project. The students rated themselves with regard to four values at their school. The values had well defined behaviours and the students and staff had education through the year on the topics that included practical reflection and activities.

Rating engagement, wellbeing and other personal skills that culture reflect is another way to indirectly assess culture. The balance of confidentiality and anonymity with such ratings is important to consider. Specific metrics such as staff retention or turnover, or a host of other process or outcome metrics relevant to your industry can be another way to use data that gives feedback on culture. For example, safety and accident data, sick-leave or absenteeism, innovation regarding new product development, project evaluation, customer or external stakeholder feedback and general performance ratings are just some areas to consider assessing that may reflect on culture.

Importantly, repeat assessment of similar information is important to gain insight over time. This can include assessing the impact of programs or efforts to influence culture.

Keep in mind that organisations including schools can be overwhelmed with data. Therefore strategic data use could include considering when, how often and what data is collected and how it will be used to assist the organisation.

In my work, to meet such a need, I developed the Six-Star Wellbeing and Engagement Survey to provide data to corporate organisations and schools on a range of variables that reflect culture and engagement. (12) The sub-categories of the survey are mood, resilience, engagement, communication, relaxation and positivity. The corporate survey has now been used by many organisations and thousands of staff. The student survey has had approximately 20,000 students from around Australia participate from dozens of schools.

Summary

In summary, commit time and energy to designing and maintaining a culture that will assist people and performance in your organisation. Consider your specific organisation and industry needs to create a culture that is best-fit for you and your people. Ensure leaders are involved in driving the culture. Finally, use direct and indirect data to obtain feedback on strengths and development areas to regularly nurture your culture.

Anthony Klarica

Anthony has worked in education, sport and corporate environments in wellbeing and performance for over 20 years

Want to know more?

Six-Star Wellbeing surveys are available through the Australian Council for Education and Research (ACER) **E:** sales@acer.org **T:** +61 3 9277 5447

sixstar wellbeing

MOOD   RESILIENCE   ENGAGEMENT   COMMUNICATION   RELAXATION   POSITIVITY

1. Coaches guide to sport psychology. Martens. 1987

2. Organisational culture and leadership 3rd edition. Schein. 2004

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11. Data informed practice. The Link. Aisnsw.edu.au April 2017 Issue 5

12. The Six-Star Corporate and Student Wellbeing Survey. Klarica www.sixstarwellbeing.com.au

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