



How to Identify Your Culture

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This article is Part 2 of our series on workplace culture. In the first installment ([What Is Culture, Anyway? - April 2018](#)), we explained that every organization has a culture, and every culture has three components—the organization’s rules, traditions, and personalities. In this second article of the series, we’ll show you how to identify the culture that you have so you’re able to assess whether it’s the culture that you want.

Identify Your Rules and Traditions

To identify your culture, examine your rules and traditions, and note what kinds of behaviors, interactions, and relations they result in. For example, if you have a dress code, what effect does it have on the workplace? Do your onboarding procedures cause new employees to feel welcomed or overwhelmed?

You may not have a mission statement or a set of core values on your wall, but people in your company do act in discernible ways. What are those ways? Think about the beliefs, norms, attitudes, goals, conventions, and behaviors you see at work. What are the common themes and behavioral trends? If employees don’t seem to work and interact in cohesive or structured ways, in what ways do they function?

Some specific questions you can ask are:

- Do people get along with each other?
- Do they trust and respect each other?
- How do they communicate?
- Do they collaborate and share their ideas or keep insights to themselves?
- How do various teams and departments work together?
- How do people generally respond to change?
- Do you hold activities or events throughout the year? If so, what is attendance like? Do people enjoy them? What effects do they have on the organization?
- What are meetings like? Are they organized and efficient? Often a waste of time?
- What management style do you use? Is it directive, coaching-based, or empowering? And how do your employees perceive it?
- What principles motivate people in your workplace?
As you go through your rules and traditions, try to come up with about five words that describe the way people behave, treat each other, and work together. These are the characteristics of your culture. For example, if people generally show one another respect, you probably have a culture of respect.

But, be sure to be honest. Describe the characteristics that you see, not the characteristics that you’d like to see.



Identify Conflicts Between Philosophy and Practice

After you've observed and evaluated your rules and traditions, check for any conflict or resistance to these rules and traditions. If you have defined core values, do people follow them? If you have established policies, do you enforce them? Do you consistently hold people accountable to your expectations? If you have a peer recognition program, do employees use it to praise their co-workers?

Just because you've established rules and traditions doesn't mean that they've had a strong effect on the workplace. Maybe employees aren't motivated to follow the policies and procedures you set up. Or maybe there are other factors at play. Maybe individual managers have their own ways of doing things that end up overruling company policies.

If people are working in conflicting ways, try to find out why. Knowing the reasons will be important when you start to assess and improve your company culture.

Identify Your People

The last thing to consider when identifying your culture is the people who work in your organization. A big influence on culture is simply the people in a place and how they work and get along as individuals.

So, who are your formal and informal leaders? How are they influencing people in your workplace, and in what ways? What kinds of personalities and personal values do your employees have? Do people tend to work harmoniously or do they clash?

Need Help Identifying Your Culture? Ask Your Employees!

Identifying your culture is a long process, and it may require more in-depth insight than one person can manage. One way to get a more expansive view is to survey your employees to get their thoughts.

Another option is to set up a Culture Committee that is composed of employees from various departments. Since the members will come from across the company, they will see things you might miss. With their help, you'll get a more accurate and complete picture of the culture and a better sense of when the culture is changing.

You can also assign the committee other culture-related tasks such as nurturing professional relationships, encouraging team collaboration, hearing the ideas and concerns of employees, and staying informed about industry trends and best practices that build great workplaces.

For this group, you'd of course want people who care about the culture, but you'd also want those who are attentive and observant and trusted by their co-workers.

Once you have a good picture of your current culture, it's time to evaluate it. We'll show you how to do that in the next installment.