

Solving the Culture Enigma Realign your culture to meet strategic goals.

by Ira M. Levin



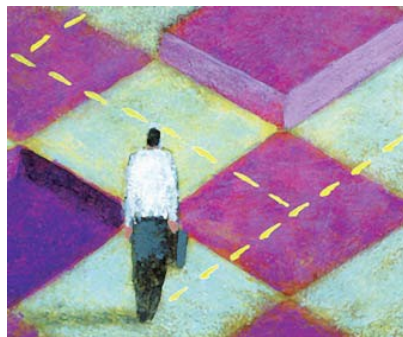
IN THIS ARTICLE, I address four more strategies for solving the culture enigma.

Strategy 5. Implement key levers for change. Culture realignment is more effective when leaders ensure that all subsystems—management structures, business processes, operating protocols, and HR practices—are functioning in ways that support and promote the desired culture. Leaders have two sets of “levers for change” to employ—instrumental levers and symbolic levers.

Culture realignment requires changing the attitudes and behaviors of members. Both need to change, and it is less important which needs to change first. Instrumental levers—including the management structure, performance management system, business process design, decision making, and resource allocation processes—are focused on directly influencing behavior. For example, a hierarchical management structure is likely to hinder developing a desired culture that is highly entrepreneurial, opportunistic, and agile. A matrix structure with dual accountabilities may help develop increased collaboration. In addition, core business processes and their respective governing policies and protocols need to be designed to be congruent with culture realignment aims.

As slow and unnecessarily complex customer service process is not consistent with the goal of creating a strong customer-focused culture, or highly bureaucratic decision making process is not conducive to engendering an agile or market-responsive culture. All HR practices—including selection, orientation, incentives and rewards, and learning and development programs—need to reinforce the behaviors and build the capabilities desired in the desired future culture.

Symbolic levers are directed at influencing attitudes, sense-making, and meanings attributed to actions and decisions. Symbolic levers include company stories, traditions, rituals, allocation of work space, company jargon, and even the core messages of marketing slogans, and position titles. In addition, all leader decisions and actions can be viewed as having a symbolic element that sends messages about what is held in high regard or desired and what is not. Stories serve as prescriptive and descriptive fables or parables that can convey important messages that reinforce the desired culture and teach members about desired behavior. Culture realignment may call for creating new stories with new “heroes” who represent what is valued and appreciated in the new culture. Traditions and rituals are another important symbolic lever. By redesigning existing traditions and rituals, creating new ones, and eliminating those no longer relevant, leaders ensure increased consistency and support for the desired culture. For example, an annual “service awards” ceremony in one company was changed from recognizing tenure to recognizing service to internal or external customer groups to support the desire for a stronger, service-oriented culture. Leaders need to pay attention to the potential meaning others attribute to their actions and decisions and strive to influence such attributions.



Strategy 6. Mobilize grassroots efforts.

Lessons from successful social change movements show the value of grassroots efforts in producing change. In the recent Democratic presidential primary contest, Barack Obama’s political organization showed the power that can be unleashed from grass-roots organizing. While a top-down cascading type strategy is important given the role leaders need to play in culture realignment efforts, parallel grass-roots efforts are also needed. Most cultures

are not singular or monolithic, but rather are comprised of sub-cultures. Grass-roots strategies try to leverage such differences by promoting customized translations and enactments of the preferred future culture. Part of this strategy is identifying specific departments, workgroups, and teams across the enterprise whose performance and operating styles already exemplify aspects of the preferred culture, or who are becoming early “adopters” of desired practices and behaviors. The intent is to recognize, encourage, and facilitate the diffusion of such efforts. Departments and work groups need to examine their operating practices to assess fit with the desired future culture, and agree how to operate in ways that represent the desired culture.

Strategy 7. Integrate into strategic initiatives.

Culture realignment is most effective when it is integrated fully into the daily operations and work life of the organization, rather than treating it as a discrete “programmatic effort.” All organizations commonly have portfolios of strategic initiatives either planned or underway to grow the business and improve operations. Such initiatives should be conducted and managed in ways consistent with the desired culture. If collaboration is a quality of the desired culture, then these initiatives need to demonstrate such collaboration in how they conduct their work. Senior leaders need to make this expectation explicit to initiative leaders and establish a firm accountability for each initiative to contribute to the culture realignment effort beyond whatever other goals have been established for it. One useful tactic is to bring together initiative sponsors and leaders to examine the cultural implications of their initiatives, and explore how their initiative could be managed in ways more consistent with the desired future culture. This helps to integrate the culture realignment effort into the ongoing work.

Strategy 8. Evaluate and refine.

Progress assessments are another component of an effective culture realignment approach. Such assessments help keep the effort on track by informing leaders and others of progress being made and calling attention to areas requiring more concerted effort. About 18 months into the realignment effort, you should conduct a follow-up culture audit. This allows enough time for some of the culture realignment

efforts to become operational and have impact. The results of this follow-up culture audit can be compared with the baseline data gathered in the initial culture audit. The results of this followup culture audit can help narrow, simplify, and reprioritize the culture realignment agenda to increase its focus. The CRT usually commissions and oversees this second audit process, but it is important to involve other senior leaders in decisions regarding revisions to the original culture realignment plan. Both the results of the audit, along with any revisions or reprioritization to the original plan, should be communicated across the organization so that all organization members are kept informed and engaged. The second culture audit also provides an excellent opportunity to celebrate identified progress made, and to link such progress to business performance gains achieved.

Culture realignment is a long-term endeavor—one that demands endurance and unyielding focus. There are no quick fixes regardless of how appealing and seductive that notion is. Culture develops and evolves slowly over time. It is simply not realistic to think it can be changed quickly. Patience, determination, and a strong certainty of purpose are required for success. The challenge for leaders is maintaining their own persistence and that of others in the face of emergent business challenges and other competing pressures. Often, well-intentioned and planned culture realignment efforts lose their momentum, stumble off track, grind to a halt, or die a slow death due to neglect, when other pressing matters vying for leaders' attention and finite company resources win out. That is why the approach outlined here calls for a structured, disciplined, integrated, and multi-faceted approach. It is also why it is so important to integrate culture change into the “real work” of the organization.

Leaders need to ensure that all stakeholders readily see that the new ways of working are better than how things were done in the past. Acknowledge and celebrate achieving milestones along the way of the Culture Realignment Roadmap—and link culture change achievements with indicators of improved performance and achievement of performance goals. Culture change won't occur and can't be sustained unless the new culture

helps people perform better, and the organization believes this to be true. LE

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ACTION: Conduct a culture realignment.