

# IMPETUS

a venture of Partners in Performance

Bringing People Together  
to Move Things Forward

## Organizational Culture

***We can define it, illustrate it, talk about it, and improve it***

by John McCann

“Organizational culture is the gateway to flourishing. And flourishing is what people want to do at work...and yes, to change the world along the way.”

John McCann

The understanding of the importance of organizational culture has come a long way. There was a time, not that distant in the past, that culture was understood in terms of morale.

Low morale, bad; high morale, good.

Matter of fact, my very first workshop, facilitated for The Support Center in Washington, DC in 1994 was titled, *Individual Morale and Organizational Performance*. Basically, the premise was that the better people ‘feel’ the better work they’ll do together.

Now, thanks to decades of research by John Kotter and James Heskett ([\*Corporate Culture and Performance\*](#)) and many others, we understand that organizational culture is much more than a touchy-feely abstraction. It is a core organizational capability. In fact, one could say that it is *the* essential capability because it determines how effectively strategy is implemented and, ultimately, the impact an organization achieves.

Let’s start with a working definition of organizational culture. Having been blessed to spend some time with the late [\*Edgar Schein\*](#), his definition is for me the most resonant: *a pattern of shared, basic assumptions that a group learns as it solves problems of external adaptation and internal integration*. I’d be the last person to try to improve on Schein’s definition. Yet I do believe it’s important to note that there’s a behavioral manifestation of this underlying set of assumptions. And that’s what people actually experience as “the culture.” So, in shorthand, I often simply say our culture is “the way we are...with each other.”

Improving how we are with each other has been at the center of the work of Partners in Performance over the past several years. Starting in 2012, we researched various approaches and structures to improve organizational culture and determined that the Competing Values Framework provided the most valid and reliable results. The framework assures organizations understand the current realities of their culture, the preferred realities going forward, and a series of steps required to advance from one to the other.

The [\*Competing Values Framework\*](#) was developed by Kim Cameron and Robert Quinn (and others) at the University of Michigan and has proven effective for more than 10,000 organizations in all sectors and on all continents. Independent research has shown the framework to be reliable, valid, and replicable. We have facilitated processes utilizing the framework within a range of organizations including the Ordway Center for the Arts, Cleveland Institute of Music, Detroit Symphony Orchestra, and the Old Town School of Folk Music.

Based on the results at these organizations and elsewhere, the evidence is clear that the Competing Values Framework, when embraced by highly committed organizational leaders, results in significant improvements in the culture. These documented improvements include:

- Less internal conflict and more cross-constituent initiatives
- Broader understanding of organizational vision and objectives
- Greater recognition of how one's work contributes to the overall mission and strategy
- Increased capacity to adapt and pursue new ways of doing things

The Competing Values Framework approach is simple, direct, and democratic.

**Step 1:** Everyone across the organization is invited to respond to a series of questions about the current culture and the preferred culture. Additionally, organization-specific questions are often asked and have proven quite useful in gathering an even more nuanced view of the culture, both current and preferred.

**Step 2:** The organization gathers, sometimes in a series of Town Halls, to discuss how they characterize their current and preferred culture. These are uniquely powerful sessions. Often, for the first time in the history of the organization, there's a shared understanding of 'how things are', and 'how we'd like them to be'.

**Step 3:** The organization, often led by a cross-constituent working group, then identifies and commits to the steps which would have the greatest impact going forward. This action plan identifies immediate, near-term, and long-term priorities that move the organization towards its preferred culture.

In Deloitte's most recent *Human Capital Trends* report, culture was the highest rated challenge for business leaders; and it has migrated from being primarily an internal HR issue to becoming a critical strategic leadership responsibility.

Does the culture of your organization matter to you? If it does, and if you believe it could be stronger, healthier, and more vital, then we would welcome a conversation.