How leaders embed and transmit culture

Based on Ed Schein

Definition of culture

Culture is the sum total of what a given group or organization has learned in coping with its problems of external survival and internal integration. Culture is for the group what personality and character are for the individual.

Once a group has a history, its culture covers all aspects of its functioning. It is expressed through behavioral norms and values, but its essence are the shared tacit, taken-for-granted assumptions. The culture is created over time by the actual learning of the organization.

Leadership is the articulation of values and behavioral norms. It means everything from a person saying what we should be doing and how. Leadership is always about what should be happening. Leaders shape the culture of their organization the by the way how they perceive, think, feel and behave based on their own conscious and unconscious convictions. In times when organizational change has become a critical issue, leadership forces cultural evolution in a certain direction. Leaders have many ways of getting their massage across.

Primary embedding mechanisms

- What leaders pay attention to, measure, and control
- How leaders react to critical indicents and organizational crises
- How leaders allocate resources
- Delibare role modeling, teaching, and coaching
- How leaders allocate rewards and status
- How leaders recruit, select, promote, excommunicate
1. What leaders pay attention to, measure, and control

This can mean everything from what leaders notice and comment, measure or control and in other ways deal with systematically. Even casual remarks or questions send clear signals to subordinates and colleagues about priorities, values, and beliefs. This have more impact than official statements. (F.e. in the case of introducing a new culture of dealing with conflicts leaders may stress that they are open to every opinion and ready to discussions, for their subordinates really counts how the leader behaves in case of a conflict and how does he deal with protests and contradictions of the colleagues.)

If leaders are aware of this processes, then being systematic in paying attention to certain things becomes a powerful way of communicating a message. If they pay attention to too many things or their pattern of attention is inconsistent, subordinates will use other signals or their own experience to decide what is really important.

2. How leaders react to critical incidents and organizational crises

In critical situations, the manner in which leaders and others deals with it creates new norms, values and working procedures and reveals important underlying assumptions. Crises or changes are especially significant in culture creation because the stronger emotional involvement during such periods increases the intensity of learning.

3. How leaders allocate resources

The process of budgeting transmits priorities and basic assumptions of the decision maker. During this procedure the fundamental reasons-to-be of the organization will be expressed and also basic convictions about risks and success and financial priorities uncovered.

4. Deliberate role modeling, teaching, and coaching

For newcomers in the organization the initial training and the interactions of the first period are have special importance in order to adapt to the culture. In this procedure informal messages of the leaders have an important impact. Leaders usually know the influence of their own visible behavior but often neglect the informal aspects. Much of the socialization processes is embedded in the organization’s working routines. The newcomer learn important cultural assumptions even without special attend training through the daily behavior of leader.
5. How leaders allocate rewards and status

Both the nature of the behaviour rewarded and punished and the nature of rewards and punishments themselves carry messages. Leaders can quickly get across their own priorities and assumptions by consistently linking rewards and punishments to the behaviour they are concerned with. Mature organizations sum up their criteria and sanctions in programs like bonification systems, systems of potential analysis, guidelines for promotions etc. Real impact have not the official and written publications and documents but what really happens to the colleagues and what they perceive. Members of the organization learn from their own experiences from performances appraisals, from discussion with the boss what the organization values and what punishes.

6. How leaders recruit, select, promote, and excommunicate

One of the most subtle yet most potent ways in which leader assumptions get embedded and perpetuated is the process of selecting new members. In most organizations this mechanism operates unconsciously. Founders and leaders tend to find attractive those candidates who resemble present members in style, assumptions, values, and beliefs. The selection followed by the criteria applied in the promotions system, are powerful mechanisms for embedding and perpetuating the culture. Cultural change can be fostered and amplified by a deliberately designed new recruiting policy by selecting newcomers who fit more to the new assumptions.

Basic assumption are also reinforced through criteria of who does or does not get promoted, who is retired early, and who is excommunicated by being fired or given a less important job.

Secondary Articulation and reinforcement mechanisms

- Organizational design and structure
- Organizations systems and procedures
- Rites and rituals of the organization
- Design of physical space, facades, and buildings
- Stories about important events and people
- Formal statements of organizational philosophy, creeds, and charters

This mechanisms are secondary because they work only if they are consistent with the primary mechanisms. When they are consistent, they formalize much of what is informally learned at the outset. If they are inconsistent, they will either be ignored or be a source of internal conflict.