Organizational Culture

Where community exists it confers upon its members’ identity, a sense of belonging, a measure of security. Individuals acquire a sense of self partly from their continuous relationships to others, and from the culture of their native place. The ideas of justice and compassion are nurtured in communities.

John Gardner, Building Community

Introduction

Consider the scene from the 1980 movie, Nine to Five, starring Lily Tomlin, Jane Fonda, and Dolly Parton. Violet (Tomlin) is showing Judy (Fonda), a new employee, around the office and giving her the scoop. The office is painted a drab color and all of the employees’ desks are in neat rows, facing the same direction. The first person that Judy meets is Mr. Hart’s (the boss) executive assistant, Roz. Roz is admonishing Violet for letting her employees have personal items on their desk (coffee cups, purses, plants). These items are forbidden. Roz is known as Mr. Hart’s spy. Everything she hears, he hears. In Judy’s first meeting with Mr. Hart, he refers to Judy and Violet as “his girls.” He looks down on them for not having played football and uses sexist language. He has the women run personal errands for him. He has created a difficult environment for women to work.

This scene describes an organizational culture that is drab, controlling, and certainly not a welcoming place to work. Compare this to the scene at the end of the movie where Violet is giving the company CEO a tour of the office. The offices are bright and inviting. Desks are organized where employees can interact with one another. Plants and personal items make their workspace more pleasant. There is an onsite childcare facility, and flexible working hours and job sharing are used to meet employees’ family needs. Instead of being a mediocre performer, the division is now setting performance records in the company. This is due in part because our three heroines (Tomlin, Fonda, and Parton) transformed the division’s culture to one that treats employees as resources.

An organization’s culture has a direct impact on its employees and therefore its success. Tamara Woodbury notes that “Organizational culture is possibly the most critical factor determining an organization's capacity, effectiveness, and longevity. It can also
contribute significantly to the organization's brand image and brand promise, which can have both positive and negative implications” (Woodbury, 2006, para. 1).

In study after study, higher levels of employee performance are correlated with higher organizational performance (Denision, 1990; Kotter and Heskett, 1992). Schein (2004) argues that leadership today is essentially the creation, the management, and at times the destruction and reconstruction of culture. In fact, he says, “the only thing of importance that leaders do is create and manage culture” and “the unique talent of leaders is their ability to understand and work within culture” (p. 5).

Lussier and Achua (2001) use Milliken and Martins’ definition of organizational culture: “the set of key values, assumptions, understandings, and ways of thinking that is shared by members of an organization and taught to new members (p. 414). Another way to describe culture is to say that it is the “personality” of the organization. Cultures eventually evolve when people are put together for any length of time, but culture can also be purposively created. Culture is different from organizational climate which is more transient and dependent upon agency personnel.

Creating a Volunteer-Centered Culture

A positive organizational culture where volunteers are valued and can be successful is critical in attracting and retaining them. Fisher and Cole (1993), and Schein (2004) emphasize that it is the task of the Volunteer Administrator to create and manage the organizational culture.

What exactly is a positive organizational culture? It is where:

• Volunteers feel welcome in the organization. They are greeted warmly by the staff and included in the daily communications and activities of the office.
• Volunteers are integrated into the organization as equal team members.
• Volunteers have a work-space and necessary supplies to accomplish their jobs.
• Volunteers are included in organizational communications.
• Volunteers are regularly recognized for their contributions, both internally and publicly. The organization has a well thought out plan for recognizing volunteers (Module 5, Lesson 3).

The Volunteer Administrator does this by:

• Helping the organization determine the role volunteers play in achieving its vision.
• Involving staff members in developing meaningful volunteer roles.
• Serving as the link between the volunteer program and the rest of the organization and, in fact, helping integrate them.
• Communicating the organization's beliefs and values in recruiting and marketing materials.
• Communicating the types of personality, style, attitudes and beliefs necessary for volunteers to succeed in the organization and selecting volunteers with those traits.
• Providing the necessary training for staff to successfully work with volunteers.
• Providing the necessary training for volunteers to be able to do their jobs.
• Developing policies that protect all parties: the volunteers, the agency's clientele and staff, and the agency itself.
• Involving volunteers in decisions that affect their work.

It is essential for volunteer administrators to create a positive environment in which volunteers can learn and operate. Volunteers freely and generously choose to give their time to better the organization. In order for them to continue doing so, the volunteer administrator must provide an environment that is pleasing to them and that encourages them to continue to be involved.

Examining Your Organization’s Culture

To assess your organization’s culture as it relates to volunteers, answer the following questions:

• How are volunteers greeted when arriving at your agency? Are they greeted as guests and valued team members?
• Is the physical office space neat and orderly? Does it appear cheerful?
• How are volunteers integrated into the organization? Are they kept separate or do they work side by side with paid staff as integral parts of the agency?
• Are there policies regarding volunteers that make them feel second-class (such as volunteers cannot use the employee break room or volunteers cannot be reimbursed for expenses while paid staff can be reimbursed)?
• Do policies restrict volunteers from fully contributing to the organization?
• Are there policies to protect volunteers’ rights and ensure their physical and emotional safety?

A good resource on assessing and transforming your organization's culture is the article, “Building Organizational Culture--Word by Word,” by Tamara J. Woodbury. This article can be found in the Winter 2006 issue of Leader to Leader (see the list of recommended readings at the end of this lesson).
Another competency identified under organizational culture includes helping others within the organization understand the philosophy of volunteerism and how volunteers contribute to the mission of the organization. The volunteer administrator often serves as the “in-house expert” on volunteers, teaching agency staff how to effectively work with volunteers. Others within your organization depend on you and expect nothing less than what we have discussed in the previous modules. Some things that the administrator does in this area include:

- Work with other paid staff and administrators to ensure they understand the volunteer program and its contributions.
- Regularly communicate volunteer accomplishments and needs to other paid staff and the board of directors.
- Monitor happenings in the organization to ensure that the culture continues to be positive and volunteer-centered.

References


