



Experiences – Good and Bad – are Key in Shaping Organizational Culture

By Jennifer Comella

How is culture formed in an organization? One of the most important elements is experience—specifically, how people are treated, and how leadership acts. Over time, repeated experiences, like ripples on a pond, have profound impacts on our job performance, our sense of fulfillment as members of an organization, individuals around us, and the culture of the organization.

As experiences unfold, we learn from them and start to create “mental models” for how to behave. It’s important, therefore, to understand how learning occurs through experience; how experiences shape our behavior; and how that ultimately shapes the culture of our organization.

Understanding the Four Stages of Learning

According to [David Kolb](#), there are four distinct learning stages—two grasping stages, and two transforming stages. These are:

- **Experience** (grasping). In this first stage, learners start with some sort of experience – from the mundane to the extraordinary – to grasp new information.
- **Observation and reflection** (transforming). In this stage, learners need time to reflect and ask questions to make sense of their experience.
- **Conceptualization** (grasping). Following reflection in stage two, learners must create a model for how they will respond to a similar situation in the future.
- **Experimentation** (transforming). Finally, learners need exposure to a similar situation where they have the chance to practice the model they predicted will bring them success. This cycle repeats with every new experience.

The Four Learning Stages in Action

Consider two examples. In the first, Ethan is a new employee. During his first several days on the job, he walks around the office hallways trying to gain a sense of direction in the building. On three occasions, he finds himself in an unfamiliar spot, so he attempts to ask a passerby how to get back to his desk. In each instance, the person he asks hurries by, avoids eye contact and says nothing. After the third time this happens, Ethan decides to stop asking for help.

In the second example, Rachel is also new at work. She approaches others directly and with candor, often appearing brusque and intimidating. She shows no appreciation for the thorough onboarding she was offered, nor does she show any excitement at the sight of her

desk being decorated and ready for her to begin. Even so, others often approach her in a tactful, caring manner. Additionally, during her first 30 days, she is informed by many colleagues that the company has a great essential skills training program in which she can learn many relationship-building skills necessary in business. After her first class, “5 Languages of Appreciation in the Workplace”, Rachel decides to thank her coworkers for taking her to lunch during her first week.

These examples demonstrate the learning cycle at work in two very different situations. In each, we see an experience, followed by reflection, an expectation of what will happen next time, and another experience that disproves or proves that new expectation. In the first example, Ethan learned, through three learning cycles, not to ask for help. In the second example, Rachel learned, through many interactions and a formal training, that her organization values appreciation and caring interactions.

Experiences like these shape us as individuals—and by extension, the culture of an organization. In the first example, we could describe the culture as “sink or swim.” Ethan is ignored – and essentially punished – for not knowing what to do. The second example portrays a warm culture, where new employees are welcomed with open arms, and appreciation for a job well done is expected.

Culture Change – How Does it Happen?

True culture change takes a genuine commitment from the top leadership, and a majority buy-in from organizational stakeholders. It’s likely that the behaviors most employees demonstrate are a result of their own experience with their leaders. Over time, they learn that the behavior is acceptable, and adopt it as normal.

How can you begin to change your organizational culture? Try these three things:

1. Put words around your culture. Start to describe the way people behave, and what the leaders in your organization value.
2. Pick out what you love or don’t love about what you described. Then, write down values and behaviors you don’t see happening that you think are critical.
3. Act the way you want other people to act. Behavior change starts with you. Script your responses or interactions to match your desired behaviors if you have to. It takes repeated experiences for others to begin changing their mental models, so keep at it.

Do you have questions about organizational culture, the four stages of learning or other human resources challenges? Contact Jennifer Comella at 440-449-6800 or [email Jennifer](#).