How Do We Keep [or change] Culture in a Predominately Remote Workplace?

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Every business has a culture. And that culture is made up of several different elements. Most workplaces have a dominant culture, one that defines them, provides a sort of glue that holds the business together. This culture can be seen in what are called artifacts. Archaeologists dig for artifacts to piece together a story of ancient cultures including what people wore, how and what they ate, how they lived (together or apart), the tools they used, stories they told through drawings and symbols, and even what was fashionable such as decorative pots or jewelry.

We look at work culture today in much the same way to see what modern artifacts we possess. We look at our brands, the colors we choose on our website, pictures, and stories we tell about our work and client successes. We notice what kind of offices we have, where they are located, and who gets to sit in what space. We notice our use of technology and how we connect. Our mission and vision statements also point to what is important to us. They tell the story of why we exist.

Studying our cultural artifacts is one way to notice culture. But it will not necessarily get to a deeper understanding of who we are, why we are here, and where we should go next. Artifacts alone do not tell the whole story because they do not tell us about the underlying assumptions

our people have, nor do they show biases and cultural differences between what we *say* we do or want, and what we *actually do or want*.

What I find so fascinating about culture today is that all of what I have said up to now is true for the normal world of work. But we are not in a normal state. If it is hard to clearly see our culture in a "normal" time, then how can we possibly understand, *or even change*, our culture during a time when most people are working remotely?

"How do we measure, or change, our culture, when we are not working together in the same space?"

I have been asked this question several times over the last few months. A large part of culture is what we choose to focus on, the kind of work we do, and how we go about it. For instance, a highly collaborative culture is one where the work is accomplished by the actions of multiple people, and the glue that holds this culture together is teamwork and cooperation.

A highly competitive culture is built on hard-driving competition, sometimes internally, and definitely external competition. Leaders in this culture are demanding and hold people accountable for stretch goals and results. A highly innovative culture is one where creativity drives its success. Mistakes are expected and learning from mistakes is critical to future success. And there are highly organized and hierarchical cultures whose success comes from efficient processes that drive down cost. This type of culture produces products or services that are reliable and dependable.

Regardless of the type of dominant culture you have at your workplace, it does seem easier to work on any initiative when people can sit down at a table together, engage in dialogue, generate ideas for how to solve something that eludes them, and build an action plan. When we attempt to do this in an online forum, the process often breaks down. And usually takes much longer.

Why Is it so much harder to get work done in a remote culture?

You may not like my answer because it is not a quick fix. I believe a remote culture is harder because we have not been formally trained in how to lead and manage effectively using a remote system structure. Let's face it, most of us were taught how to accomplish tasks by sitting around a table, using the group energy to build ideas and camaraderie. We learned to read body language and could tell when someone in the group was not following along, or disagreed with an idea, or was distracted by something on a device in front of them.

Our skill set is for co-located work.

Our cultures have been built on co-located work. Even when a business has multiple offices, they still have people working together in the same space, focused on a project without the distractions of home and personal lives. Our personal and professional lives have merged in today's dominantly remote work environment. When we started this remote journey, it was interesting and challenging. We all had technology issues, sound that didn't work, people who wouldn't turn on their video so you couldn't see them, dogs that jumped into the frame, cats that sat on your keyboard, and children racing through the picture. It was funny at first, and it was fun to see where people lived and how they decorated their space. But now, over six months into this remote work, we have [mostly] mastered the technology, learned to live with this new blended work/personal life, and have figured out how to put our sound on mute.

But the quality and efficiency of our processes, especially to solve complex problems has decreased. And, it has been much harder to maintain the culture that made our companies successful. It has been harder to maintain our cultural "glue" in this remote workplace system.

What can we do about it?

We are all to be congratulated on making a remote culture work as well as it has over the past six plus months. It was hard, but we did it. The question now is what do we do over the next six months, and the six months after that? How will we hold our workplace together if this goes on for another six to 12 months of predominantly working remotely? There are several surveys that show if given the choice, over **half of our workforce** would like to remain remote working on a permanent basis even. While this could have some positive benefits for our workplace, and our finances if we can decrease office costs over the long-term, what impact will it have on our individual cultures both short and long term?

How do we prepare for a permanent remote working culture?

Here is what it will take. First, we need to understand what kind of culture we have. Determine the dominant culture, identify what defines us, notice the glue that holds us together, and how we interact internally and externally. In other words, what kind of culture helps us be successful in the markets we compete in?

Next, we need to ask what kind of culture we WANT to have. If our current culture is creating a drag on us achieving more success, then we may need to make some changes in our current culture. To do that, we first need to look at what KIND of culture will help us be more successful: more collaborative, more competitive, have more process and control, or engage in more creativity and innovation? This will depend a lot on where we are in our business lifecycle.

A start-up will likely have a Creative/Innovative dominant culture because it has just formed in order to bring a new service, idea or product to the market. But over time, that same start-up will

need to focus on its people, and process, and will eventually need some structure (control), and a marketing plan. As the company matures, it will need to shift the focus of its culture.

Once we understand your current culture and have an idea of what it SHOULD be, we are ready to develop ideas for how to make some changes. But before we do this, we need to look at our leadership from our managers to directors, to the CEO and Board. What skills do our leaders have, and how are those skills HELPING US ACHIEVE THE KIND OF CULTURE WE WANT? In other words, if we want to be more collaborative, are our leaders prepared and have the skills to help shift our culture to being more collaborative?

And here is the tricky part, can the leader implement ideas in a REMOTE work environment? Here is why making changes today is so complex. Because it is not just about knowing what you want to become, it is about assessing what your leadership skills are in a REMOTE workplace.

Today's workplace requires remote leadership skills if you want to change culture.

What are remote leadership skills?

Think about it. Just because we are good at leading a meeting where everyone is sitting around the same table, does not mean we have the skill to lead an online meeting and achieve the same outcomes. Yet, out of necessity, we basically transitioned ourselves and our current skill sets into the remote environment using the same framework and thinking that we did when we were co-located.

I was in a meeting a few weeks ago that was supposed to be two hours. It was a packed agenda, multiple presentations, including multiple speakers. There were the usual technical issues with screens freezing, members having to sign off and back on, people forgetting they were on mute, etc. There were people talking over one another because of the awkwardness of a large group meeting online, and then the ones who were silent and did not add anything to the discussion. At the end of two hours we had completed only half of the agenda items and were nowhere near an action plan that we needed to create. The leader running the meeting was trying to hear from every person, to make the discussion as collaborative as possible. At the end of the meeting, with no real plan of action, it was clear that a "collaborative" style was not what was needed there.

The point of this example is that even if a workplace values collaboration and wants to increase its collaborative culture, that does not mean that every interaction must be highly collaborative. In the example above, a leader who understands how to be more "controlling" would have been more effective and efficient. For leaders it is about understanding your DOMIANT culture characteristics as a leader, while developing other cultural characteristics you can draw upon depending on the situation, and what you are trying to accomplish.

How do we develop leaders to create the kind of culture we need?

First, assess each leader's dominant culture characteristics. Compare this to the current dominant culture and desired future state. We then support our leaders in understanding what they tend to do, especially when leading meetings. We ask them to identify, before a meeting, what they need to accomplish and what a successful meeting looks like.

Questions to Ask:

1. What kind of dominant style should I use in this situation?
   a) Am I primarily a Collaborative leader, making sure everyone has a voice and is heard, taking time to generate dialogue to problem solve the issue, helping the group work well together, connect, and have fun?
   b) Am I primarily hard-driving and just want to hold people accountable for stats and goals? Do I need less "small" talk and more action, especially deliverable results?
   c) Am I a leader who needs to inspire the group, get them out of their normal ways of thinking so they can be more creative and innovative? Am I someone who values failure, and learning from mistakes, even rewarding people for risk taking that could lead to breakthrough results?
   d) Am I a leader that is all about the process and creating efficiency? Do I need more rules, procedures, and standardization for our work to be successful?

2. What outcome(s) do I need to achieve?
   Take a few minutes to think about what we want to achieve with the meeting that we will be leading. What do we want by the end of the meeting? Is it an action plan? A well-developed concept or idea? A commitment from a core group of people to keep working together. Or a design for a formal process that will increase efficiency in an area that needs to be more efficient to meet client or internal needs.

3. Will I get the outcome(s) we need with my default style, or should I lead using a different skill set?
   Will my dominant style allow me to get the outcomes I need for this agenda, or this discussion? If not, what should I do instead? Or is there someone I can pull into this meeting, to co-chair, who brings a skill set I need to achieve the outcomes? Using a co-chair serves a couple of important functions. First, it allows someone else to lead, giving them experience and sharing the workload. Second, if I lean on the skills that come naturally to another person, I create a great opportunity to learn from them, thus building my own skill set.

Changing culture is a change in how leaders, lead

In summary, here is the road map for how we can make change in our culture or maintain the kind of culture we have worked so hard to build, in our remote workplace system. It is in part understanding our culture and what we want it to be, and about working with our leaders to make sure they have the skills to be successful in leading REMOTELY.

1. Determine what kind of culture we have today: Collaborative, Creative, Control, or Compete as examples of the types of culture that are measured by the Organizational Cultural Assessment Instrument (OCAI) developed by Cameron and Quinn.[1]
2. Determine what is our desired future state using the OCAI.
3. Measure the dominant cultural characteristics of our leaders.
4. Think about the ways we are working, including our meetings. Ask our leaders to think about outcomes they wish to achieve BEFORE meetings or online work groups.
5. What kind of culture should the leader create to achieve the desired outcomes? And how is this different with a remote workplace? Think about what is needed for the current situation, instead of doing what you have done in a different kind of setting. Remember what got you here, will not necessarily get you there. Just because a way of leading in the past has been successful, it does not mean it will be helpful in the remote work situation.
6. If the leader does not have the skill set to lead the group in a NEW way, seek a co-leader or ask someone who has that skill set to lead the meeting.
7. Every leader should work to develop the skills in each of the four cultural quadrants so they can bring the right leadership tools for each unique situation. A highly effective leader can shift their personal style to match the needs of the situation.

One more thing that is important for leaders to think about. This comes from consultant, teacher, and trainer on mindful communication, Oren Jay Sofer. Oren teaches what he calls the ABC's for mindful ways of thinking and communicating. The A stands for Awareness. As a leader, it is helpful to pause before action or comment. We can notice what we are thinking and feeling. Between stimulus and response there is a space. The larger we can make our space, the more able we will be to respond instead of reacting. The B stands for Balance. Are we too extreme in our thoughts or emotions? Is there a middle ground to stand one? Having balance in our thoughts allows us to listen more carefully to what others are saying. The C stands for Curiosity. If we are trying to solve a problem, how much curiosity are we bringing to it? A closed mind cannot gather new ideas. And the S stands for Support. Above I talked about how, as a leader, if we are not strong in a needed skill set, then we should ask for support from someone who is. We all need support, especially in the challenging remote environment today.

Maintaining culture, let alone changing culture, is not easy, but it is doable. Get support, find out what you need to be wildly successful in your marketplace, and help your leaders navigate and strategize how to "remote" lead.

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[1] Cameron, K.S., Quinn, R.E. (2011). Diagnosing and Changing Organizational Culture: Based on the Competing Values Framework. Josey-Bass: San Francisco, CA.

About the Author

Denise Gaskin is a culture consultant, leadership coach, and change management enthusiast. Denise helps businesses measure culture and determine what kind of culture they need to be wildly successful in their marketplace. She helps businesses build stronger leadership teams through personal and group assessment followed by tailored skill building.

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