

Tackling an Important Question at Your Firm

By Denise Gaskin, Ph.D.

Discover your core values using a Humble Inquiry process

Do you have an issue or challenge at your firm that needs to be discussed? If so, here is a process to consider if you want to understand what cultural values lie at the heart of your issue. It's been my experience that leaders tend to notice and focus on behaviors rather than core values when they attempt to make changes. Changing behaviors has tremendous value and can help your firm achieve many goals. But if you want to change something that is core to your culture, you will need to take a different approach. And this approach is not quick, so be prepared to spend some time, and resources, to understand the core culture beneath your question. My recommendation is to use what Edgar Schein calls a "humble inquiry" type of questioning that will lead you to understanding values, not just behaviors.

The first thing you will need to do is identify the issue that you want to discuss. Is there something that is not working within a department or practice area, or a segment of your firm? I've been asked to help firms identify core values around questions like "what does it mean to be an owner at our firm?" and "what do we really believe about collaboration on client matters?" These are big questions that cannot be answered only by observing behavior. You can learn a lot about both of these questions by noticing the culture including the artifacts of culture such as workspaces and how they are used, email groups including who gets included and who is not, reports that are circulated with data on performance. What is getting measured and who receives it? This kind of noticing will give you clues as to what is important, deeply important, and forms the foundation of your firm's core beliefs.

In order to understand your firm at a deeper level, though, you will need to engage the members of your firm in a discussion. The facilitator of this discussion should be someone who has some knowledge of your firm, either by leadership spending time with him or her, or through their previous work with the firm. The facilitator needs to commit to listening with great curiosity and be aware of and contain their own biases, as best they can. This requires a facilitator who is self-aware and who can articulate their own values and core beliefs. Years ago, I was engaged in an action research project, where I was in an active observer stance. That meant I was both part of the organization where I was conducting the research as well as the facilitator of the process. As an active observer, it is important to study your own core values so these do not interfere with the results. You may want to employ an interview so you can understand the person's "come from" place also known as presuppositions.

Facilitate the Discussion

Alan Hodgart in his book *Organisational Culture in Law Firms* outlines a process to use when you want to develop an understanding of an issue you may be wrestling with. This is a facilitated critical review process with representative members of your firm. Note that sometimes, depending on the topic and the size of your firm, you may want to get everyone involved, not just a representative sample. I've used Hodgart's framework, and added my own perspectives and experiences working with professional service firms for greater than a dozen years.

Discuss the Issue

Put together the group(s) who will discuss the issue you are having. Decide if you want to include all those who work at your firm. Do you want to mix owners with non-owners if you do a combined group? If you work in some professional service firms, you may have distinctions along the lines of "licensed" employees vs. those who work in other capacities such as service

support or administrative staff. How will you fill the groups in terms of your mix of geography, age, experience, or compensation level?

Using Humble Inquiry

In order to get to the core values from the expressed behaviors, the facilitator should follow a humble inquiry approach. The facilitator, and other leaders, must take the stance that they don't already have the answers. They must be genuinely and eagerly curious about what the members have to say about the issue. If they take the stance of extreme curiosity, they will ask the right kinds of questions because the questions will flow from having taken this position.

Examples from Schein's work of this kind of inquiry to get the conversation started and keep it going are:

“So.....(with expectant look)”

“What's happening?”

“What's going on?”

“What brings us here?”

“Go on.....”

“Can you give me an example?”

Identify the values of the firm

Capture what the group members say during the discussion and then ask them to identify from the discussion what the values are that underpin the topic. Do not challenge these but be prepared for members to talk about **behavioral norms** rather than deep-seated values. Get them to articulate a VALUE that supports that behavior. This can be a challenging thing to do but keep at it until you have identified the underlying core value.

EXAMPLE: A behavior could be that the average billable hours of an owner in a professional law firm are 1650 year when the goal is to achieve 1800 billable hours per year. This might be identified as an issue, one that impacts both the firm and individual's profitability. Knowing that an attorney bills on average 1650 hours per year does not tell you what the person's core value are, because the hours (or reduced goal hours) point to behavior, not a core value. The value could be the lawyer wants to have dinner every night with family. The value could be the desire for work-life balance.

Identify further issues and related values

Try to identify at least three to five issues and go through the same process as the steps above.

List the various values identified for each issue, test the relationship to each other (identical or disparate), and discuss whether a core set emerges. If there is not a core set it could indicate that the firm has a weak culture instead of a strong, core culture. Note that many private practice law firms have weak cultures and are primarily a bunch of sub-cultures that have a loose interdependence.

Explore how these values are represented (or not) elsewhere in the firm

If by way of an example, members say collaboration is a value because it gets recognized in the compensation system process, explore where else collaboration may show up as a value. Does it show up in formal and informal recognition systems, in how requests for proposals are completed, with obtaining new client work, and in how data gets presented to members both individually and collectively, etc. Look for consistency and inconsistency.

Test the identified values

Initiate a discussion about changes to the systems and processes discussed so far. What are the impediments to change? What does this say about the firm's value set?

Set out consistencies and inconsistencies

Set out both consistencies and inconsistencies that have emerged, and work with the group to identify the issues behind both. What seems to be causing the inconsistencies (e.g. other systems that do not support collaboration for instance) and what issues lie behind these? Take the same approach for inconsistencies. A critical issue here is to retain a balance in the discussion between the visible or (espoused) values and the areas in the firm where these appear to operate and not operate (values in use). Work with the members to explore what lies behind each set.

Concluding Remarks

This process of deep inquiry will take time, and these meetings could be several hours to really get to the values and not just look at the behaviors. Leadership at your firm should decide how important it is to have this discussion and if it is important, dedicate the time and resources to conduct discussions that will reveal core values, not just observed behaviors. Make sure you hire a trained, experienced facilitator who has gone through their own process of identifying their biases and presuppositions so what they believe will not interfere with data collection. Use a Humble Inquiry approach to asking questions as this will elicit deep thought on your issue(s). The facilitator should remain in an open and deeply curious position with the groups they are working with.

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