«All organisations have cultures and those cultures can be a force multiplier when aligned to the visions and goals of the organisation. Understanding how organisational culture contributes to, or hinders, CHANGE and EFFECTIVE PERFORMANCE is something we should all be aware of here at the Joint Warfare Centre.»

Brigadier General Steven J. DePalmer

ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE

DOES IT MATTER?

By Garry Hargreaves
SMC4 Division, Joint Warfare Centre

OFTEN DISREGARDED, OR CONSIDERED LATE in any strategic redirection, organisational culture is the critical part of what makes an organisation tick. Sometimes described as the feel of an organisation, or portrayed as “how things get done around here”, cultures are the intangible but powerful effects of senior staff’s behaviour combined with the policies, procedures and practices that create the operational environment. This influences our actions and determines behavioural norms. Organisational culture describes the subconscious, subtle psychology of the workplace. Not only do all organisations have cultures, most have subcultures silently operating within the overarching organisational culture. If the organisation is to be highly effective then these cultures need to be consistent.

Organisational researchers tell us that businesses ignore organisational cultures at their peril. Cultures are highly robust and enduring; having the ability to provide sustenance to organisational effectiveness or conversely accommodate and nurture resistance to change, leading to an inevitable reduction in organisational effectiveness. Consequently, it is critical for an organisation to understand its organisational culture and be able to relate and synchronise its evolution with the organisation’s visions and goals.

Where do they come from and what do they do?
An organisational culture derives from the deeply embedded beliefs and values of the organisation’s members, especially the leadership. It resides at a psychologically deeper level than policies and procedures ever could. Over time, the organisational culture becomes the DNA of the organisation and to make things even more challenging, whilst an organisation’s policies, procedures and practices are readily observable and auditable, the shared beliefs and values of an organisation are not so easily observed; yet they have the potential to be far more potent and resilient.

Organisational cultures influence what people say, and what people do, when they are not being watched. That potency may be revealed in alarming ways: the current U.S. Defense Secretary, Leon Panetta, commenting on a recent event in Afghanistan, said: “this incident absolutely violates both our regulations and, more importantly, our core values.” He is clearly saying that core values trump regulations; he is not alone in this assessment of the influence that organisational cultures can have.

An organisational culture has the attributes of permanence and resilience and when the culture is appropriately aligned, it can be a real asset for a business that is eager to evolve or transform.

Conversely this can become a serious issue for an organisation that wants to adapt,
but is subject to significant levels of staff churn and rotational leadership, as is the case for the JWC and many other Commands. How do we maintain direction and drive on the journey towards a new vision when the person at the helm, and the senior managers, disappear before we ever get near it?

- Deeply understanding “intent” will go a long way to ensuring that a vision becomes a reality.
- Use the fact that the more persistent staff, civilians and Norwegians in our case, will have significantly more influence on the organisational culture than their position in the organisation might lead you to believe.
- Start your cultural awareness campaign early.

Cultural transformations cannot be achieved through a rapid or superficial approach; they take time and the engagement of the right people. The problem is that in many organisations, transformation of the culture starts long after new visions have been embarked upon, leading to an inevitable lag that diminishes organisational effectiveness. Let me provide you with a tangible example. In 2003, we were an operational HQ with a well-understood mission and values along with beliefs that supported the mission. Ten years had allowed us to develop supporting cultural norms that aligned what we thought, said, and did, to the role of the JHQ North and the Vision of the Commander. People sat tight, they knew their roles, the work was stable and involved little travel.

Then we became, almost overnight, the NATO Joint Warfare Centre (JWC). People that were previously running plans to combat invasions from the North-East (serious Article 5 missions) were suddenly planning the integration of experiments into NRF events with out-of-area and non-military actors. They were asked to lead multinational planning syndicates and were exposed to operational uncertainty and highly volatile travel demands. You can appreciate the culture that resided in JHQ North was not the one that fit best with the new mission of the JWC. Luckily, we were able to start slowly and evolve gently into the new culture; since the first events were modest (approximately 15 percent) compared with the scale of the events that JWC delivers today.

Evolving the organisation culture was perhaps even more challenging for ACT. A staff officer sat at a desk worried about shipping corridors in the maritime world of SACLaNT was suddenly responsible for considering global security challenges twenty years ahead. Might that require a very different mind-set and behavioural norms? Of course it would, yet we often leave the cultural alignment until after the organisational change.

One side effect of organisational strategy conflicting with personal values and beliefs is the psychological distancing of the staff from their business environment. This results in compliant rather than committed behaviours. Organisational ambivalence can result; and whilst the team may look like it is performing from the outside, it is highly unlikely to be operating at peak potential. If we do not, or cannot, identify the support-
ing organisational culture, we will not be able to translate the visions of the leadership into our day-to-day behaviours in order to reach new levels of operational effectiveness. Given JWC’s current and emerging role in NATO, I wonder if we will have the time to get our cultural act together like we did in 2003. Like a boat dragging its anchor along the bottom of the sea, organisational culture can certainly slow you down, perhaps even snag and halt any progress at all. A misaligned organisational culture can apply a significant braking effect to any change or development initiative.

Why consider this now?

Our Commander, Major General Jean Fred Berger, is re-aligning the JWC Vision for post-2014. Do we wait until then to start to re-adjust the reinforcing processes and identify congruent behavioural norms? Or, do we begin to consider what we might need to introduce or revitalise now? Before focusing on the benefits of getting the culture aligned with the business, I want to explore briefly the “so what” of getting it wrong.

In a military environment, toxic, inflexible, energy draining cultures are supposed to be unlikely. Compliance can be demanded and disharmonious behaviours rapidly and conclusively stamped out. However, as "NATO’s training focal point for full spectrum joint operational warfare” is compliant ambivalence enough? Of course not; but if we don’t do something to first identify and then align behaviours and processes to the vision, then maybe compliant ambivalence will be as good as it gets.

A lack of coherence and congruency regarding organisational cultures can be debilitating. Let’s say that the vision is “to be the best”, but the procedures force you to pick the cheapest possible solution to any given issue. If the vision requires “staff flexibility” but the personnel regulations don’t support that, or when policies and processes are not supportive of, and congruent with, the organisational visions then people will be unable to identify the required behavioural norms. On the other hand, when you get the vision, policies and procedures aligned, the silent, invisible wind of culture will propel the organisation effortlessly towards the goals.

Adapting the diagram that Boris Diekmann (Senn-Delaney) showed us back in October 2011, you can visualise how real opportunities for increased effectiveness and change can be stifled through an inappropriate organisational culture. No matter how many great ideas are fed into the system they will be degraded, deformed or digested altogether unless the organisational culture supports their existence. (© 1994-2010 Senn-Delaney Leadership Consulting Group)
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<tr>
<th>Attribute</th>
<th>How can we know if we have an effective organisational culture?</th>
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<tr>
<td>Relationships and Communications</td>
<td>Does the organisation create and sustain friendships and out-of-office loyalties? Does it care about the people outside of the work domain? Is there evidence of cross divisional pan national friendships evolving? Do people listen to others in order to understand their viewpoint or do they listen for a gap in order to force home their own point? Is there evidence of positive corridor/canteen discussions taking place?</td>
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<td>Trust and Commitment</td>
<td>Is the staff encouraged and supported in order to stretch their role? Is there evidence of risk tolerance or are witch-hunts prevalent? Is there evidence of unnecessary micro-management? Do the staff work harder/longer to get something finished? Are they proud of their efforts? Do they understand that what they do is important? Do they understand how they personally contribute to the overall goals of the JWC?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Recognition and Empowerment</td>
<td>Do all levels celebrate and share in successes? Is the JWC somewhere that others aspire to be employed? Is the staff told (meaningfully and specifically) that what they do is important? Do we allocate “special” assignments to the high performers? Do the ideas coming from the bottom manage to percolate to the top? Before making decisions do managers consult with subordinates? Is there evidence of a “my way or the highway” state of mind?</td>
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<td>Credibility and Humility</td>
<td>Is there evidence of all levels of “walking the talk”? Are diversions from cultural norms dealt with swiftly and consistently? Do peers provide feedback to ensure that standards are maintained without the need for the heavy hand of management? Do others consider the organisation smug? Does it rely overly on its current reputation? Is there evidence of “tribal” sub cultures emerging? Does the organisation tolerate over inflated personal egos or indulge those engaged in self-promotion?</td>
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<td>Flexibility and Accountability</td>
<td>Are individuals encouraged to operate outside of job descriptions in order to come to the aid of others? Do the policies and procedures mirror the flexibility desired? Is an attitude of “what more can I do to assist” evident in the workplace? Do people raise their hands to state “I can do this”?</td>
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<td>Respect and Tolerance</td>
<td>Do the staff communicate respectfully between themselves and others? Do they talk respectfully about our customers and sponsors? Are they tolerant of minority views and mindful/respectful of national cultural differences? Do they say “in my nation we do it this way” or do they say “in JWC we do it this way”?</td>
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<td>Enjoyment and Learning</td>
<td>Are people bright eyed, energetic and engaged in their roles? Do we teach our best people to other organisations? Are they going off to do the same job for someone else? Do they look forward to coming to work? Is transformation and evolution within the mind-sets of the staff? Is there a commitment to innovation? Are failures seen as an opportunity to learn and grow?</td>
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<td>Organizational &quot;Oneness” and a Shared Sense of Purpose</td>
<td>Do the staff refer to management activities as “they are doing, they are planning, etc.” or do the staff talk about “we are doing, we are planning, etc”? Is there evidence of shared values and committed staff? Do the staff understand what our Vision means to the organisation and themselves? Does what is important to us as individuals, compliment the organisation’s Vision? Is it the Commander’s Vision, the JWC Vision or is it our Vision?</td>
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Aligning words and deeds

I have often heard organisations claim, “people are the most important resource we have”, but is that claim borne out in practice? I remember thinking about that as I, and many other JWC staff, were brought home during the infamous Icelandic volcanic ash incident. The Commander at that time, Lieutenant General Wolfgang Korte, said to his staff “get my people home” and they did, working around the clock and in spite of the extant policies and procedures. There were JWC staff on buses from Romania, leaving rental cars at borders, flying indescribable routes into Norway but, the leadership was “walking the talk”, demonstrating that their people were indeed most important to them. That incident changed my beliefs, affected my values and influenced my future behaviour.

Components of organisation cultures

Shared values and beliefs are what drive our corporate identity and influence our personal behaviours, not just at work, but in every aspect of our lives. Highly effective teams somehow “know” what other members of that team will do. Take as an example a professional soccer team where the players know instinctively where the other players in their team will be. This is not just training; it is made possible because of a shared awareness of common goals and acceptance of behavioural norms. Professional teams do not like surprises — they develop a game plan matched to the vision of the coach and the abilities of the team. The shared values provide a sense of order enabling other team members to understand intent and expectation and yet these shared attributes operate for the most part outside of our awareness. So what are some attributes of highly effective organisational cultures?
POWERFUL ORGANISATIONS ARE transformational, adaptable and able to refine their practices and outputs to meet the changing Levels of Ambition and integrate the very latest concepts. I trust that some of those words are familiar to the JWC readers. If we are to become powerful, transformational, adaptable and integrative, might we need to have a culture that fosters some of these attributes? Sure, but don’t we have enough to do without trying to keep yet another plate spinning in the air?

Look again at the first sketch in the article (Page 52): what do you now notice? Sometimes we get so engrossed in keeping certain plates spinning that we do not realise that others may be about to drop off. The easiest one to neglect is the one that does not normally thrust itself into our consciousness; that which represents our corporate values and beliefs and determines behavioural norms — the organisational culture.

An effective organisational culture provides and nurtures the environment where self-motivation and commitment to organisational improvement is the norm. It is likely to exhibit a high tolerance of ambiguity that will enable it to cope with the messy, unpredictable process of change. Cultures remain effective by adapting and constantly re-aligning themselves to the business. Just as poor cultures sap moral and drain engagement; effective cultures have a contagious element that allows staff to soak up organisational challenges and remain motivated through difficult periods of uncertainty.

What can I do?

Know your organisation’s Vision. That does not mean being able to repeat it or know where it can be found in the Tasker Tracker. It means translating it into something that is meaningful for you, something that resonates with your core values and beliefs. It means seeking clarification to give meaning to the lofty aims of the leadership so that in your daily work you know, specifically, how you are contributing and why it is important for you to continue to do so.

Highly effective organisations consist of people who believe in what they do and who value the contribution their organisation makes; these people are able to connect their contributions directly to higher-level visions of the leadership. People in organisations with effective organisational cultures do not just comply with the visions, they commit to them; with their hearts and minds.

The well-respected management guru Peter Drucker is often quoted as saying “Culture eats strategy for breakfast”. It is a position that I have seen borne out in practice. As we move towards 2014, adjust to emerging realities and start to re-look at our spinning plates, we should ensure that we do so through an organisational culture that does not lag the JWC Vision. The culture needs to walk hand-in-hand with the Vision so that we can be effective through change thereby avoiding the requirement to play catch up post change.

Values and Beliefs in the Workplace

Imagine that the COM has given you the chance to take a 6 month sabbatical – all expenses paid. But, you will not be able to communicate with ANYONE at your office while you are away.

The only condition set is that the work must go on, effectively, and someone will be provided to carry on your work.

Write a memo to the person that will be taking over your responsibilities. They need to know what is important to you, what principles should guide their decisions and actions in your absence. They need to know the values and beliefs that you think should steer their behaviour while you are away.

Clockwise: Briefer Mr Boris Diekmann (Senn Delaney) with the author (right); JWC training facility; JWC NATO civilians discussing, inter alia, how our values and beliefs transform our behaviours at the annual Civilian Development Integration Course; a slide presented at the CDI Course.

About the artist
Contemporary artist GRY HEGE RINALDO was born on 27 January 1974 in Stavanger, Norway. Her collections include The University College London Art Collection, London/England; Haugesund Billedgalleri, Permanent Collection, Haugesund/Norway; Stavanger Art Museum, Stavanger, Norway (with six pieces of oil paintings); The Danish Bank, Copenhagen, Denmark. View more of the artist’s work at: www.kunstgalleriet.no; www.gryrinaldo.com; Rinaldo’s website, www.gryrinaldo.com is currently being re-designed.