

# UNDERSTANDING A COMPANY'S CULTURE

Written by:  
Megha Venketasamy

Culture is probably a word that you read, hear and see of often, if you are into change/people/marketing/strategy management. Culture is slowly growing into a segment of it's own for strategy formulation. But is it exactly?

According to Frances Frei and Anne Morriss at Harvard Business Review:

"Culture guides discretionary behavior and it picks up where the employee handbook leaves off. Culture tells us how to respond to an unprecedented service request. It tells us whether to risk telling our bosses about our new ideas, and whether to surface or hide problems. Employees make hundreds of decisions on their own every day, and culture is our guide. Culture tells us what to do when the CEO isn't in the room, which is of course most of the time."

While you cannot see or touch a culture, it is present in the actions, behaviors and approaches of the members of an organization. From hiring practices to how people work, make decisions, resolve differences of opinions, and navigate through change.

A company culture is something that is pre-existing in your company's genetic code. It is not something that employees or team members bring with them. In fact, a company with just one employee – a company with no employees, if we are being honest- still has a culture.

That culture oozes from the "vision, mission values, and assumptions" – and this stands even when we are in "sole proprietorship scenarios".

Knowing why your company/organization/association/group is doing what it is doing is your MISSION.

Knowing where your company/organization/association/group is trying to go is your VISION.

And understanding how your company/organization/association/group is going to go about, is the glue that holds your Company/organization/association/group together. This is your Culture.

This article offers guidance on learning to sense or understand a firm's culture.



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## **TO UNDERSTAND A CULTURE, ASK THE RIGHT GROUNDED QUESTIONS**

Ask someone about their firm's culture, and you are likely to hear a series of general statements, such as:

- We are an inclusive culture that encourages collaboration.
- It's an environment where everyone's opinion is respected.
- We operate in an open system and we value feedback
- We reward initiative in our organization.

These are semantically loaded statements, at their core they carry in depth meaning and they carry meanings of their own linked to the genetic code of the company. Simply said, the way one company will define collaboration will surely be different from the way another company will define collaboration.

Hence, the only way through understanding that one specific culture is to ***“ask questions; pause to listen for the sake of listening; and listen to the stories that are shared and celebrated.”***

## **14 TYPES OF QUESTIONS TO HELP YOU UNDERSTAND A COMPANY/ORGANIZATION/ASSOCIATION/GROUP'S CULTURE**

### **1. WHAT ARE THEIR VALUES?**

Values play a key role in a company's life. Values shout what that particular company “stands for”. Hence, understand what they value, will guide you to join the dots between what they say they believe in and what they do in reality.

Explore the terms used, ask for meanings and ask for further meanings.

### **2. THE VISIBLE SIGNS OF CULTURE?**

Look for visible signs of the culture on the walls of the firm's facilities. Are the walls covered in stories or photos of customers and employees? Are the company's core statements of mission, vision, and values present throughout the firm's facilities? The absence of those artifacts says something as well.

In the event we are referring to online entities, then look for their brand story; value statement; members' story and bio – all these are visible signs of what they stand for.

### **3. INDUCTION PROCESS INTO CULTURE?**

Is there a process in place that journeys with each new comers as well as longer-term members to help them understand, embrace and embody the culture. Any entity without a defined structured induction process is?

### **4. HOW DO THEY LEARN?**

Is a learning process in place to learn? Learning will impact on how individuals as well as teams get acquainted with the culture and embrace same over the long term. Is this learning process in place aligning with their values?

For example, if one of the values is Inclusiveness, then does their learning process embraces learning from each and every individual within the team regardless of their position held.

### **5. HOW DO THEY CELEBRATE? WHAT DO THEY CELEBRATE? HOW FREQUENTLY DO THEY CELEBRATE?**

Are there quarterly town hall meetings? Does the firm get together when new sales records or big customer orders are achieved?

### **6. ARE THE FIRM'S EXECUTIVES APPROACHABLE?**

Are there regular opportunities to interact with top executives including the CEO? Some firms use “Lunch with an Executive” initiatives to offer employees time to ask questions and learn more about the direction of the firm.

### **7. HOW ARE BIG DECISIONS MADE?**

What's the process? Who's involved? Do executives encourage decision-making at lower levels of the organization?

### **8. ARE EMPLOYEES' INPUT SOUGHT for new initiatives including strategy?**

### **9. IS CROSS-FUNCTIONAL COLLABORATION ENCOURAGED?**

Again, ask for examples. How do they do that? Past examples of projects. How do they assess and evaluate success?

### **10. ASK FOR AN EXAMPLE OF WHEN THE MEMBERS OF THE ORGANIZATION CAME TOGETHER TO DO SOMETHING REMARKABLE.**

Dig deeper and probe for examples of individuals or teams exhibiting heroic behaviors that enabled success with the big initiative. Listen carefully for group orientation or the singling out of one or more individual efforts.

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**11. ASK ABOUT EXAMPLES OF PEOPLE WHO SUCCEEDED WILDLY WITHIN THE BOUNDARIES OF THE ORGANIZATION.**

Strive to understand what it was they did that made them rising stars in the organization. Was it their initiative and innovative thinking? Was it their ability to rally support?

Ask how – through what process they engage to do that?

**12. HOW IS CONFLICT RESOLVED?**

Conflict resolving is not only a highly sensitive process but it also provides opportunity to live the set values. Successful conflict resolutions happen through a structured and open process where information is collected with the objective of learning and then further enhancing the current conflict resolution process in place.

How do they resolve conflict? Who are involved? How do they ensure each person's involved in that process are heard, seen and listened to ?

How do their values get reflected through their conflict resolution process?

**13. ARE THE LEADERSHIP ROLES FILLED WITH INDIVIDUALS WHO HAVE BEEN PROMOTED FROM WITHIN?**

Does the firm/organization tend to hire from the outside for senior roles?

**14. HOW DOES THE ORGANIZATION INNOVATE?**

Ask for specific examples. Be certain to explore what happens when innovation initiatives fail.

These questions serve the purpose of crafting the “happening culture” for you. These questions will provide you with insightful information with the reality.

They will eventually not only help you to understand the culture but also weight whether you want to partner with such organization whether as a collaborator, a future employee or service provider.

From decision-making processes to the firm's commitment to employee development and engagement, a careful questioner can learn a great deal about daily life in a firm through deft use of the questions above.