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# ELEMENTS OF CHURCH CULTURE

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## ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

*“...A pattern of basic assumptions—invented, discovered or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration—that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to those problems.”*

### **Organizational Culture & Leadership** — Edgar Schein

The culture of a church can be described as its collective personality. For the most part it is invisible—showing itself obviously only in retrospect, or to an outsider, or when its patterns are disrupted or violated by the unsuspecting. Culture that has served a leader for a season can become that leader’s worst natural enemy when it comes time for the leader to go in new directions. Once a leader grasps that culture is a huge force in a church’s life, and that it can be tweaked over the course of many months, that leader has a great advantage.

So, what are the key ingredients to this thing called culture—factors that can be purposefully adjusted by a leader, instead of being left to form or remain on their own? What are the best ways to actually begin shaping those cultural elements?

- I. A Common History—selectively remembered and transmitted over time in order to communicate core values and beliefs about the nature of things and what is highly prized in the organization.
  - A. What events do you recall to people’s attention?
  - B. What lessons and values do your stories teach? (“Willing to leave COTW home”; “Sanctuary for homeless.”)

- II. A Shared Experience—collectively interpreted and sorted according to the basic mission of the organization, and seen in light of expected problems for which solutions have been or will be found.
  - A. How do you proactively interpret difficult or negative experiences? How do you talk about needs your church is currently facing?
  - B. What epitomizes the experience you would like everyone to have? What solutions would you like to see in CM, discipleship, outreach, etc.? Tell the stories!
- III. A Folk Society—made up of symbols, language, rituals, songs, stories, passages, oral traditions, unspoken taboos, dress and speech distinctives, behavior codes, status levels—what everyone knows but no one explicates.
  - A. What patterns are normative and acceptable for church service conduct; for increased connection with the church; for relating to the pastor; etc.?
  - B. How do people become leaders in your church? What qualities must they possess; through what hoops must they pass; how will they be acknowledged, etc.?
- IV. A Network of Relationships—developed over long periods of time and settled into relatively permanent groupings by past personalities and events; by coincidence of such things as childbearing, choir attendance, joining the church, being on a mission team; and, by the sort or emotional interactions which normally separate or connect individual people.
  - A. What configurations of people are static, closed or resistant to growth? Break them up or isolate them!
  - B. Who are the as-yet-unconnected individuals who have expressed affinity with you and your vision? Take thought and advantage for them!
- V. A Ministry Philosophy—shared by the important decision-makers about basic concepts: such as truth, what things mean; God, mission, time, correction, group boundaries and definition, and means of going about ministry. This creates the paradigm within which ministry is carried out.

- A. How do you define words—authority, ministry, spirituality, leadership potential, submission, etc.?
  - B. What are your perspectives on things—learning new songs, political involvement, spiritual counseling, “contemporary services” and what it means to be a committed believer (in terms of church)?
- VI. A Prevailing Atmosphere—modeled as the usual/acceptable mood and tone of the group and its activities; how the group feels to outsiders and the measure of how people within the group are doing: Anyone who displays a different mood is asked, “What’s wrong?”
- A. What feeling do people get from Sunday service; the church office midweek; community exposure, etc.
  - B. What do you convey about leadership training and the possibility for new people to connect to and join with long-timers?