

## How Do You Preserve or Change Company Culture?

If you work in organizational development or change management, you probably hear that question all the time.

I recently read an article by Joel Peterson, Chairman of Jet Blue, called "[What New Leaders Too Often Overlook About Company Culture.](#)"

Let me back up and define culture. According to [Gotham Culture](#), it is: *the underlying beliefs, assumptions, values and ways of interacting that contribute to the unique social and psychological environment of an organization.*

Well-known organizational psychologist Ed Schein is cited in Gotham's article as saying:

***"Business leaders are vital to the creation and communication of their workplace culture. However, the relationship between leadership and culture is not one-sided. While leaders are the principal architects of culture, an established culture influences what kind of leadership is possible."***

And Peter Drucker, the "father of management theory" is quoted as saying, "Culture eats strategy for breakfast."

**So, according to anyone's definition, culture is this incredibly strong force within an organization.** It can be either a motivating force or one that can put severe limitations on what an organization can accomplish.

In his article, Peterson says culture gets determined by the CEO. Hopefully board members are discerning enough to articulate the desired culture and assess CEO candidates to determine if the one they select has the ability to maintain the **organization's values** or create the desired organizational culture.

While acknowledging the importance of the CEO in maintaining or changing culture, the Gotham article gives a broader view - the top 200 or so leaders in an organization collectively determine that social and psychological environment.

There is a lot of talk lately about organizations functioning in a VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous) world. Given that this notion of VUCA resonates with many organizations, how do you win?

First, an organization needs to know and be able to articulate what it values, and it should **be able to measure it in its potential new employees. If a candidate doesn't have those values coming in the door, could he or she develop them?**

For me, VUCA means uncertainty, and the way E•A•S•I-Consult<sup>®</sup> measures that is through the Burke Learning Agility Inventory<sup>®</sup>.

There are 38 items on the test. Uncertainty requires a person to figure out what he or she **doesn't know. If they don't possess a high level of each of the** learning agility capabilities, how confident are you of their ability to develop them? How quickly must they be able to **develop what they don't possess? When you bring in new people from the outside** - or if you appoint someone to the senior ranks internally - how are you going to indoctrinate them in **your expectations, the areas they need to work on and what "great" looks like?**

I was recently working with an organization that is confident its senior people are very smart and possess a lot of technical knowledge. **But how can it move from a "knowing" organization to a "learning" organization?**

In his article, Peterson infers that it is all determined by the CEO. Schein is more optimistic - a broader group of senior leaders create and support the culture. He also sees an interaction between culture and senior leaders.

How do we best prepare senior leaders, particularly the new ones, to best understand the culture as it currently exists, then preserve what makes sense and change what needs changing? If what needs changing involves learning agility, how do we set that tone, create a supportive and reinforcing environment and still achieve our performance targets?

One of the dimensions of learning agility is *Performance Risk Taking*. A measure of this dimension involves volunteering for projects that involve the possibility of failure. High-performing organizations pride themselves on their track records of success. Maybe a perfect **track record means you didn't push yourself far enough and don't yet know the limits.**

We know there is a relationship between learning agility and high potential, and we know that learning-agile people will be more successful than those who are less learning-agile in unfamiliar jobs or assignments.

A characteristic of those with more learning agility is a higher degree of a dimension called *Flexibility*. People with a high level of *Flexibility* are going to question the status quo. They are not going to assume the way it was done before is the best way to do it going forward.

How does an organization encourage and nurture that dissent? **It has been given “lip service” in organizations where I worked, but the message conveyed was that it wasn’t valued.** It was viewed as disruptive.

If organizations want to create winning cultures in a VUCA world, they are going to have to embrace learning agility. Learning agility, while valued conceptually, has not been put to the test of what will be required in terms of norms and behaviors that will form the psychological and social environment to support it.

### About the Author

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