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# How to Understand Your Current Company Culture

Artifacts and Employee Interactions Display Your Existing Culture When Viewed

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Are you ready to take a look at the [culture that exists in your organization](#)? Your assessment of [your culture](#) may make you happy; your culture assessment may make you sad. Whatever your culture assessment teaches you about your culture, though, your culture is what it is.

To [change your culture](#), to enhance your culture, to benefit from your culture, you need to see and understand your existing culture. For best or for worst, your existing culture supports you in the accomplishment of your organization's mission and goals –or your culture does not.

But, you don't know the answer to this question until you take the time to do an assessment of your existing culture. Go ahead and take the first step.

## Challenge of Internal Culture Assessment

It is difficult for people to assess and understand their own culture. When people are at work on a daily basis, many of the manifestations of culture become almost invisible. Assessing your organizational culture is a lot like trying to tell someone how to tie their shoes.

Once you've been tying your own shoes every day for years and years, it is hard to describe the process to another person.

Thus, your complete familiarity with your surroundings, the interactions of your coworkers, the conduction of meetings, the interactions of team members, and the artifacts in offices and cubicles will require you to step back and view your workplace environment with new eyes.

## How to Observe Your Current Culture

You can obtain a picture of your current culture in several ways. To participate in the assessment of your culture, you must:

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- **Try to become an impartial observer of your culture in action.** Look at the employees and their interaction in your organization with the eye of an outsider. Pretend you are an anthropologist observing a group that you have never seen before.  
Ask yourself questions such as: How do people interact with each other? How are conflicts resolved (and are there conflicts)? How do senior leaders interact with middle managers and employees? How do middle managers interact with reporting employees?
  - **Watch for emotions.** Emotions are [indications of values](#). People do not get excited or upset about things that are unimportant to them. Examine conflicts closely, for the same reason. Do people seem engaged, interactive, excited, happy, friendly, morose, or withdrawn? Do they smile and interact with you as you walk by their desks?
  - **Look at the objects and artifacts** that sit on desks and hang on walls. Observe common areas and furniture arrangements. Are they interactive or are they

sterile? In one memorable company, to several consultants who were walking through the cubicleville, the sterileness of the environment was striking—no family photos, plants, knick-knacks, [desk accessories](#), or toys. The company president informed the visiting consultants, privately and under strict confidentiality, that he was closing the company at the first of the month—and he didn't want the employees to know. The consultants informed him that the employees already knew. Their empty workstations were a testimony to this knowledge.

- When you observe and interact with employees, **watch for things that are not there**. If nobody mentions something that you think is important (like the customers or expected sales growth), that is interesting information. It will help you understand your organization's culture.

## Assess Your Organizational Culture

You can assess your current [company culture](#) in several ways. This culture assessment can involve walking around, conducting interviews with employees, or using a culture assessment instrument.

**Participate in a Culture Walk:** One way to observe the culture in your organization is to take a walk around the building and look at some of the physical signs of culture.

- How is the space allocated? Where are the offices located?
- [How much space is given](#) to whom? Where are people located?
- What is posted on bulletin boards or displayed on walls?

- What is displayed on desks or in other areas of the building? In the work groups? On lockers or closets?
- How are common areas utilized?
- What do people write to one another? What is said in memos or email? What is the tone of the messages (formal or informal, pleasant or hostile, etc.)? How often do [people communicate with one another](#)? Is all communication written, or do people communicate verbally?
- What [interaction between employees do you see](#)? How much emotion is expressed during the interaction?

These are just a few of the questions to answer when you observe and assess your organizational culture. Take a culture walk frequently to observe organizational culture in action. You will reach the point where you can assess and feel subtle differences over time.

**Culture Interviews:** Another way to understand the culture of your organization is to interview your employees in small groups. It is just as important, during these interviews, to observe the behaviors and interaction patterns of the people as it is to hear what they say about the culture.

Since it is usually difficult for people to put into words what the culture is like, you will gain the most information by asking indirect questions. The following are examples of indirect questions you can ask during a culture interview.

- What would you tell a friend about your organization if he or she was about to

start working here?

- What is the one thing you would most like to change about this organization?
- Who is a hero around here? Why?
- What is your favorite characteristic that is present in your company?
- What kinds of people fail in your organization?
- What is your favorite question to ask a candidate for a job in your company?

**Culture Surveys:** Written surveys taken by people in the organization can also provide information about the organizational culture. It is important to create or select [the survey using the information collected during the culture walk](#) and the culture interviews.

You can either purchase or custom design a survey. An off-the-shelf survey may have interesting questions on it; it may also have questions that are not relevant to your organization. It has been used in a number of other organizations, though, so the questions may be reliable and validated.

These are ways in which you can observe and understand your organizational culture. The results of your assessment of your organizational culture will tell you what to do more of, less of, stop or start.

The results from your organizational culture assessment will either confirm the efficacy of the culture you have or provide the encouragement you need to change your organizational culture.